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BY OCTAVE FEUILLET.

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THE JOURNAL OF A WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

MYSELF. *May*, 1872.

AT the Convent my Quarterly Reports almost invariably concluded with the following definition of my personal character :—

"Disposition—cheerful. Talents—good. Possesses a gravity of demeanour in advance of her years, and a well-balanced mind. Nevertheless, her conscience appears to be somewhat restless."

A restless conscience—well, I do not deny it! But as for the other attributes placed to my credit—I really must beg pardon of the good ladies—but they were quite mistaken!

Since, therefore, my kind instructresses were in error, is it altogether astonishing that the world made the same mistake? I think my appearance must have something to do with this false, if flatttering, opinion. Let me see!

I am of a very dark complexion, but without much rosiness of tint; my face, moulded with wearisome regularity of feature, is as severe as it is possible for a

young lady's face to be. A very decided shortness of sight has already imparted an expression of sleepy indifference to my black eyes, the brilliancy of which (of course!) without this unfortunate peculiarity would naturally be irresistible. Besides, I am by nature calm in my manner of speaking and moving. I can seat myself without disturbance, and succeed in giving a spectator an idea that I am naturally impassible. I never had any inclination, nor have I the means, to set public opinion right on this point, and so my closely-locked Diary only shall be told that this grave and unimpressionable Charlotte is in reality a most romantic and passionate young lady.

And that is just the very reason why I have postponed writing a Diary for so long—a Diary which I eagerly purchased three days after my departure from the Convent—and which—the book, not the Convent—has waited three whole years for my first confidences to be inscribed within it.

Day after day, more than twenty times I am sure, I have seated myself before these blank pages, burning, like King Midas's barber, to pour forth my secret, but twenty times that "restless conscience" of mine has compelled me to throw down my pen. This monitor has told me that I was going to do something imprudent and wicked—that the habit of registering my impressions, of analysing my feelings, of nursing my day-dreams and clothing them with a reality they could never possess—all would have a certain retribution for me—viz., that of raising up in me those springs of romance and passion which are dangerous in a woman, which might prove fatal to the dignified repose of my life, and which I ought rather to strive to check and extinguish than to encourage.

Something that my dear grandmother said to me this evening, I am thankful to say, has excited in me certain

doubts. We have had some friends to dinner. We played a game called "Secretary." The players write questions upon slips of paper, fold them up, and throw all the papers into a heap, then each person takes a paper and answers the question on it.

But one of our guests—a young deputy, who rather prided himself upon his wit—always managed so that he picked out his own question to reply to, so as to answer with more *éclat*. He had on this occasion asked himself "What is a true woman?"

I was charged to open the papers, and I read his question and his answer at the same time. This was the reply:—

"A true woman is one who seeks no romance in her life—for there is no good in it—who seeks none of the poetry of existence—for duty is not poetical—who cares not for passion—for what is passion but the polite term for vice?"

There was a murmur of approbation as this was read, in which I was weak enough to join, and during which the writer betrayed his *incognito* by a modest smile. He was, however, immediately put out of countenance by my grandmother, who exclaimed, as she suddenly suspended her knitting—

"I beg your pardon, young people, but I cannot permit such heresies to pass unchallenged before these ladies. Under the pretence of making them true women would you make them fools or Puritans? In the first place I do not understand how you would always put passion in opposition to duty—one on one side and the other on the other. Why can you not include passion in duty? Not only can you, but you ought; and let me tell you, my dear young friend, that that is the secret of the life of all good honest women. Duty by itself, take my word for it, is very unpalatable stuff indeed. You say it is not poetic; there I entirely

agree with you ; but it must become so, so that we may have pleasure in practising it. It is precisely to poetise the commonplace 'duty' that we use those romantic dispositions which you inveigh against so loudly. If you ever marry, just wed a lady who is perfectly unromantic, and you will see what the result will be!"

"What will it be?" inquired the young deputy.

"Well, everything in life will become flat, stale, and unprofitable to her ; her husband—excuse me—the very first, then her home, her children, even her religion. Goodness me! it is not necessary to warn the present generation against Romance ; my dear sir, I assure you there is no danger on that account. We shall not die of an excess of enthusiasm, but from a plethora of platitudes, believe me. But to return to *our* unworthy sex, which is, after all, what is in question. Look at those women of whom they speak in Paris—I mean those of whom people talk too much. Is it their poetic imagination which is the cause? Is it the search after the Ideal that leads them astray? Why, are they not, four-fifths of them, the most brainless and empty-headed creatures imaginable? Believe me, young people," added my grandmother, "take my advice, do not worry yourselves about this ; be as enthusiastic and as romantic as you please. Strive to get a grain or two of poetry into your souls. You will be all the better for it—more honest and much happier. The poetic sentiment in a woman is like the music and the incense in a church—the charm in the surrounding good!"

So spake my grandmother, Heaven bless her! and it is in consequence of her speech that at last—at this hour of midnight and with a quiet conscience—I unlock my precious Diary, and why I dare to say, face to face with myself, "Good night, you romantic and passionate Charlotte!"

CHAPTER II.

AN INVITATION. *20th May.*

I WAS seated at my piano yesterday in my boudoir when Cécile de Stèle, my school friend and inseparable companion when we were in the Convent, entered the room like a whirlwind as she usually does, seized my hands in hers, gave me two soft kisses, and said in her clear, sharp way—

"Charlotte, will you always be my dear sister, my guide, my support, my dear little second mother, my heart of gold and my tower of ivory?"

"Why this string of questions, my dear?"

"Because it is in your power to render me a very great service. Just think! my father is going away!"

"The general!—leaving Paris!"

"Oh, only for a few weeks. He is obliged to go upon a tour of inspection in the provinces, and he is going to send me down into the country while he is away—into l'Eure, to my aunt Louvercy, in the depths of the forest. My aunt is the best of women, but she lives there in her old château with only her son—my cousin Roger, you know—who is half-demented since he was so fearfully wounded in the war. He has no legs, no arms, to speak of—scarcely the features of a human creature remaining. Poor fellow! it is a

great pity, but you may imagine what sort of a house it is likely to be. So I said to my father that I would go, but it was like being sent into exile; it is despair—death! 'But will you permit me to take Charlotte d'Erra with me?' 'Take her with you, by all means,' he replied. And so, my dear, I am going to carry you off."

"But my darling little——"

"Oh don't say no, I beg; if you do I shall lie down and expire at your feet. Do me this favour; who knows! after all perhaps it won't be so very 'slow.' We can amuse ourselves together, we can ride or play lawn tennis, or practise archery, and there are, of course, some people living in the neighbourhood. So, my dear, we will just turn their heads for them, you with your supercilious, haughty style of beauty, I with my own little 'attributes'—I don't know what to call them exactly, but in common parlance I may class them together as *doggishness!*"

I frowned, and said in my gravest contralto, "*What* do you say, Cécile?"

She glanced down over her pretty figure with an air of bravado, and as she displayed her pearly little teeth she replied—

"*Doggishness!*"

"May I ask where you picked up that elegant slang term?"

"From my father," she replied.

"Well, all I can say is that had your mother been alive she would have scolded your father finely."

Cécile looked at me fixedly with her great deep eyes, in which tears were slowly gathering; then, kissing my hands, she said in a supplicating tone—

"You will come, will you not?"

"But, dearest, I cannot leave grandmamma."

"Your grandmamma? Bring her too! I have settled it all. I have written to my aunt; and look here, here is her reply—a most pressing invitation to your grandmamma. Come, let us go to her."

Two moments later Cécile precipitated herself into my grandmother's apartment. The old lady, who was alarmed at the slightest noise, shook on this occasion like an aspen-leaf.

"Oh my goodness! what has happened? There must be something wrong. Here, run at once, all of you. What is it!—what is it?"

"It is a letter from my aunt Louvercy, madame."

"Oh, poor Madame Louvercy, poor woman, how is she? What trials she has had! and her poor son, too! Dear me, dear me—poor things! Well, what does she want me to do?"

"If you will kindly read, madame——"

My dear grandmother took the note and assumed a very serious air. When she looked up again she perceived Cécile kneeling at her feet upon the carpet, her hands clasped, bending her pretty flushed cheeks towards her in an agony of supplication.

"Dear, dear," said my grandmother, "how the pretty face burns!"

"You will go, madame, won't you?" said Cécile.

"My dear child," replied my grandmother, as she kissed her forehead, "as a general rule I have a horror of moving. I dislike it immensely. But on one side I see that you and Charlotte have made your arrangements, on the other the very kind and affectionate note which your aunt has written, as well as my regard and compassion for her, compel me to consent. Nevertheless I must tell you that when I am tempted away from home it is a serious business. I cannot rush away and home again without having time to breathe, and, on the other hand, I cannot go and intrude myself upon

your aunt. But let me see: how long do you propose we shall remain?"

"Oh, as long as ever you like; six weeks—two months."

"Ah, that is quite enough for me," replied my grandmother, laughing.

So it was arranged that we should start in ten days, and meet Cécile at the château. She went yesterday. Ten days will be scarcely sufficient for us to get ready, for our preparations must be considerable, as you may judge when I tell you that my grandmother always carries three screens with her, so as to exclude the draughts which she avers always rage within old châteaux.

I look upon these great packages with my usual disdainful calmness, dreaming all the time of the belfry and the north tower, the galleries full of ancestors and ghosts, and amid them all the poor mutilated half-witted man who, no doubt, mingles his groans with the sighing of the wind in the long corridors.

All these things, alas! are perfectly enchanting to me.

CHAPTER III.

A LETTER FROM CÉCILE LOUVERCY.

28th May.

THIS morning I have received a letter from Cécile which portrays the life at Louvercy in very different colours—less sombre, but still, perhaps, even less attractive to me. Here is her letter word for word :—

"Château de Louvercy, 27th May.

"My Dear,—I know you will groan in spirit. The whole arrangement is nothing more nor less than a trap! I can put no trust in any one for the future. My father, my aunt, both of them usually so reliable, and up to this time perfectly without reproach, have leagued themselves in a dark conspiracy against poor little *me!*

"On Monday, at five o'clock in the afternoon, I arrived at the station, where, by-the-bye, there was a blind man playing the 'Marseillaise' on a penny whistle. I only tell you this because, as you must alight at the same station, you may recognise it, and not go on any farther.

"Well, I alighted, and was received in my aunt's open arms. We exchanged greetings, and got into her carriage. She had scarcely spoken half-a-dozen words when I perceived that there was mischief

brewing. My aunt appeared embarrassed; she threw out mysterious hints.

"It appeared at length that there were other visitors at the château. She was so afraid that I should find it dull pending the arrival of my friend Charlotte. How *could* my aunt have got such an idea into her head, I wonder? At any rate, a small and select party, suitable to my age, had been invited. 'Two young ladies, relatives of the late M. de Louvercy; Mesdames de Sauves and Chagres, my dear.' 'Oh, aunt, how kind of you!'

"'Then their husbands' (bravo, aunt!), 'and these ladies' brothers as well, two very nice young men indeed—remarkably nice.'

"'Hem!' I thought, but I only said, 'Really?'

"'I hope you have brought some pretty dresses, my dear,' continued my aunt.

"'Oh, just the same as I usually wear,' was my calm reply. 'You see I did not expect to meet any society so far away from town.'

"'But at your age one ought to pay some little attention to such things,' remarked the old lady.

"And now, my dear Charlotte, cannot you see the whole thing? You understand the conspiracy now, do not you?

"At length we drove into the large courtyard of the château. There is a fountain in the centre of it, and swans were swimming about in the large basin beneath. Standing by the margin were the ladies with their husbands, and the very remarkable brothers, forming quite an interesting family group. I bowed and blushed; I leaped up and kissed Mesdames Sauves and Chagres, and then ran away to change my dress, while I heard voices behind me like echoes repeating, 'She is perfectly charming—perfectly charming—charming.'

"My suspicions, which had been aroused in this extraordinary manner on the first occasion, have been confirmed—on that very evening, upon the following day, and every day since.

"The dull château has been transformed suddenly into a paradise of pleasure, an enchanted castle, a theatre of happy festivity and chivalrous amusement, the whole pervaded by a suspicion of orange-blossoms behind the scenes!

"There are walks to be taken every morning, riding parties in the afternoon, dancing and charades in the evening. Personally I am fooled to the top of my bent. My tastes, my slightest wishes are understood, divined, and complied with almost before I have had time to express them. Certainly the emulation is most touching. Do I wish secretly for a bunch of camellias? There they are. A parrot? Here he is. A gilt cage to put him in? The cage is at my elbow. The moon? Well, I could have the moon, no doubt!

"From all this, my dear, you will see that things are looking serious. There is no longer the shadow of a doubt that my perfidious aunt and my wicked father have conspired to marry me out of hand. There are two candidates to choose from. Let me introduce them to you.

"Mesdames de Sauves and Chagres have each a brother; and these young men, who are cousins, bear the same family name. They are M. René and Henri de Valnesse. And here I am reminded of those historical parallels at which you were so good when we were at the Convent—between Charles the Fifth and Francis the First, for instance—don't you remember? 'If one were the more able politician, the other was the greater warrior,' and so on.

"To apply this form to the Messieurs Valnesse, I must tell you that if one is dark, the other is fair; if

one uses double eyeglasses, the other only uses a single pebble; if one sings sentimental ditties which make tears rush to my eyes, the other performs comic songs which make me laugh heartily.

"Both of the young men look well on horseback, or, for that matter, on foot. They both are excellent waltzers, pleasant companions, remarkably well brought up, have some fortune, and both of them, if I can credit certain appearances, are exceedingly ready to place said fortune at the feet of the timid and gentle innocent who writes these lines.

"You will say, 'I suppose you have made your selection.'

"No, my sweet friend, I have not. Each one pleases me to the same degree, and as I cannot very well marry *both*, I am awaiting the arrival of a certain wise Charlotte to ask her advice and to make a choice accordingly.

"Your choice shall be my choice, and your divinity shall be mine. So come, my dearest, at once without the least delay, for that would be awful, and you can quite understand that it would be positively *cruel* to leave in such a dreadful dilemma your most affectionate friend, "Cécile de Stèle.

"P.S.—All this time my poor cousin Roger secludes himself in his tower and scarcely ever goes out, except to drive about the grounds in a basket carriage drawn by a pair of most spirited horses. My aunt believes that he chose them on purpose, and that he wishes to kill himself. Very sad, is it not? Good-bye, dearest. Come soon."

This letter discomposed me very much. Cécile was like a sister to me. Although we were nearly of the same age, there had always been something of the maternal feeling of regard towards her. The great

prospect in store for her gave me much food for thought, and I felt alternately glad and disquieted.

I am so very anxious for her happiness. Dear girl, she deserves all she can attain to. She is so affectionate, so "clinging," so sincere. A little giddy-pate, perhaps, but possessing a pure and faithful heart, always ready to sacrifice herself, and quick to acknowledge an error. There is in her, as she herself is fond of saying, something of the angel and the devil mingled, with a large preponderance of the angel element. Such a lively, affectionate, and tender-hearted girl ought, in my opinion, before all others to be married well, and to be guided gently and firmly by her husband.

I was also somewhat disturbed at the thought of the responsibility which she desired me to undertake. I was too young and too inexperienced to guide her in the choice of a partner for life, and on whom that very life might depend. But at any rate I would act conscientiously and fairly. It appears to me that I shall be much more difficult to please on her account than I should be on my own. Messieurs de Valnesse must look out. The angel with the flaming sword is coming to keep watch over the gates of Paradise!

CHAPTER IV.

LOUVERCY.

Château de Louvercy, 6th June.

MY dream has come true. There *is* a north tower in the château, and what is more, I am lodged in it. This is capital!

But I must relate everything in proper order. We arrived here this afternoon, then—by we I mean my grandmother and myself. As we left the train the first objects upon which our vision rested were the blind man and his penny whistle; next Madame de Louvercy and Cécile in a landeau; then we embraced in our line of vision two young cavaliers who were caracoling in the station-yard as they endeavoured by voice and hand to pacify their horses, which were more or less disturbed by the hissing and whistling locomotive.

A furtive glance from Cécile's eyes introduced me (privately) to the two aspirants to her hand, and I immediately set about a closer examination of the gentlemen, while they, I fancy, paid me the same compliment. My impressions are favourable, I must confess. They appear to be honest, straightforward young men. I feel somewhat more satisfied—I like them.

We were soon rolling along the dusty road escorted by these gentlemen, one at each door of the carriage. We passed by numerous orchards bright with rosy blossoms; the sky was of a blue and opal tinge. Cécile,

radiant in a sky-blue dress, pressed my hands affectionately, bestowing a smile now on one side now on the other, so as to keep a just and equal balance of favour, and we were all perfectly happy!

I had not seen Madame de Louvercy for a great many years; she has certainly aged very much. Her hair has become quite white, but it suits her sweet, albeit sad, expressive, face wonderfully. There are two dark channels beneath her eyes, caused too surely by tears. She seldom speaks directly of her great grief, but frequently alludes to her sorrow. As we drove to the château I heard her tell my grandmother about her unfortunate son, whose sad condition had absorbed her whole care for a long time, but she also recognised that Cécile had no mother, and that she had duties with regard to her niece also. All this was said in an undertone, and with a courteous smile, very touching indeed to one who knew the secret of the mother's deep distress. The poor lady is all the more to be pitied, as they say that he was an extremely good-looking, fine young man before that horrible wound mutilated him so dreadfully.

The sound of the carriage-wheels was suddenly hushed; we entered a leafy avenue, at the farther end of which I could distinguish the façade of the château, built in that severe but elegant style termed Renaissance, I believe. Here is the court, which is a flower-garden too; there are the swans which flapped their wings as we passed. Mesdames de Sauves and de Chagres were standing in the verandah waving their pocket-handkerchiefs, while their husbands, throwing away their cigars, waved their hats enthusiastically. It was a veritable triumph. It is very pleasant to meet these happy young couples.

In a very short time Cécile ushered my grandmother and me into our apartments, and while I was making

some trifling alterations in my dress Cécile probed me with a string of feverish questions.

"Well, now, quick—tell me. From what you have seen, what do you think of them?"

"From the little I have seen I must say I think them both very pleasant and agreeable."

"Really? I could hug you! But, now, which do you prefer? quick! quick! say—the fair or the dark one—M. René or M. Henri?"

"My dear child, I have no preference whatever. But you? What is your opinion, dearest?"

"Why, didn't I write and tell you I had no choice, and that I was waiting for you to come to settle the question? You must tell me which to take, and I will take him."

"I assure you, Cécile, that your extreme confidence in my opinion rather overwhelms me."

"Look here, dear; I am going to place you between these two gentlemen at dinner. You must study them thoroughly—you understand. I will tell you what I want to know, and you must find out for me all I want; then after dinner you can tell me the result. Well, then, in the first place I want to find out which of them cares most for me; secondly—and this is a very important point—which is the better character; then which is the more intellectual and better informed, for I should like to marry somebody who can appreciate me. I should like to know which is the most generous and charitable; this is really important. Well, then, I want to know which of them likes travelling best, and that is another important particular; then—what are you laughing for, Charlotte? I am quite serious, I assure you!'

"I am laughing at the idea of your requiring me to find out so much at a sitting. Well, I will do my very best for you, depend upon it."

Cécile then left me with my maid, and I prepared for dinner. I arrayed myself in a very simple costume, the confidante's toilet in fact, not too gay and cut half low, a small piece of lace in my hair, Spanish fashion, surmounted by a red rose. Thus equipped I did not fear. and so I went down.

But before the second gong I had some little time left to examine my surroundings. It far exceeded my expectations. It is a room fit for a captive princess, hung with old tapestry, sombre and mysterious in its folds, and the windows have deep embrasures like those in a church. I am, as I have already said, located in the north tower; this tower is a high square building of the feudal age, and is certainly of a much more ancient date than the remainder of the château, of which it forms the right wing. It is more particularly appropriated to M. Roger de Louvercy, who can here more easily seclude himself. A sort of railing has also been erected between the tower and the château, which completely shuts off the unfortunate young man from society when he pleases, and this is his desire whenever there are any visitors staying at his mother's house, for he has a morbid feeling that everybody, except his mother, regards him with horror and disgust. Some recently-erected buildings are used by him as his stable and coach-house, and from which he can pass out directly to the country roads; he is thus enabled to go in and out without passing through the central courts of the château.

M. de Louvercy occupied apartments on the *rez-de-chaussée*, and my grandmother and I are lodged on the first floor; we have been admitted, Cécile says, into these almost sacred quarters as we are the least noisy of the guests. Besides, we are in communication with the château by means of corridors on every floor, so we can move about without any chance of meeting M. de

Louvercy. But Cécile has warned us that he frequently goes upstairs to the library to work there, but she says that we can very easily avoid him, poor fellow, as we can always hear the sound of his crutch upon the stairs.

Notwithstanding this suggestion, I have promised myself that some day or other I will take an opportunity to have a look at this morbid recluse, and even during the first few hours of my sojourn here my curiosity was satisfied, even punished, for my sympathetic feeling for this most unfortunate young man can scarcely be restrained since I have seen, and, above all, heard him. The window of my dressing-room opens into the small courtyard where M. de Louvercy's private stables are. While I was dressing for dinner, and striving to fasten the red rose in my lace headdress, I heard a great uproar in the court, mingled with the baying of dogs, appealing cries, and, if the truth must be told, some very formidable oaths. I peeped through the curtain and perceived two enormous Newfoundland dogs springing at the nostrils of a horse, which was in a perfect foam. My gaze then lighted upon a sort of dogcart, and in it was seated M. de Louvercy. There was no mistaking him, unfortunately, for his mutilated arms and limbs plainly showed who he was, while of his face scarcely anything could be distinguished but two long, fair moustaches hanging down *à la tartare*.

He called vociferously for two servants, who, no doubt, might have arrived more quickly, and who came running up in terror. He greeted their appearance with a volley of very strong epithets while they assisted him to dismount from his dogcart. I quickly drew back the curtain, and saw no more. I was very much distressed. This display of passion rather took my attention from his misfortune. I do not think I shall see very much of my neighbour.

Shortly afterwards we sat down to dinner. Cécile placed me, as she said she would, between the two young rivals for her favour. On my right hand was seated the dark M. de Valnesse, on my left the fair one, an arrangement, by the way, which appeared to astonish Madame de Louvercy considerably. Cécile placed herself exactly opposite, the better to watch my proceedings. Beside her she had placed the curé of the village, and amiably endeavoured to make him laugh whenever he was drinking his wine. She herself laughed heartily, while she tried by expressive glances to make me perform my duty. She evidently thought that I was not getting on fast enough. The fact is that I found it more difficult than I expected. The gentlemen were so extremely polite that they gave me no opening for inquiries. They scarcely spoke, and looked at me in a vacant sort of way, and appeared much preoccupied respecting the red rose in my hair. But it was not that which occupied their thoughts.

We had scarcely left the dining-room when Cécile took me aside.

"Well," she said, "what have you found out?"

"I have found out that they are both very shy, and that is about all."

"Shy!" exclaimed Cécile; "that is because you did not encourage them sufficiently; you must draw them out if you wish them to do themselves justice."

This appeared to me only reasonable. I had not drawn them out sufficiently, and subsequently, with the aid of the coffee, I drew them out a little more. They both sang to me, and danced with me frequently, and after each waltz I kept them by me for a short time ostensibly to enjoy their conversation. At these intervals Cécile would wander through the room with no apparent object, occasionally giving way to peals of meaningless laughter, and sometimes tossing about the music

on the piano. After a time she suddenly disappeared, and seeing she did not return I at length left the room in search of her.

I found her walking up and down the courtyard in the twilight, like a person taking exercise after a bath. I approached her, but she pretended not to notice me, and turning her back upon me continued her promenade. At length I spoke to her.

"Cécile," I said.

"What?" she replied.

"Are you ill?"

"No."

"Well, what is the matter?"

"Nothing."

I looked her straight in the face, and she continued—

"No, there is nothing whatever the matter, at least nothing that I might not have foreseen if I had had a little more sense. It is only to be expected, now that you have come with that goddess-like figure of yours, that I should be put on one side. Of course it is not your fault that you have such a beautiful figure. I do not blame you—I mean—I beg your pardon, but you can dispense with playing the coquette, my dear; when a woman is as pretty as you, if she once begins to play the coquette into the bargain, there is nothing more to be done!"

"Really, Cécile, I do not know whether I ought to laugh or to be angry with you. What can it matter? Did not you beg and implore me over and over again to study these young men——"

"Well, you have studied them too much, and they have 'studied' you considerably too."

"What, then? Do you wish me to go away?"

"Oh no!"

Then after a pause she melted, and, seizing both my hands in hers, exclaimed—

"I am an idiot, am I not?" and throwing herself into my arms she began to cry.

I endeavoured to soothe her as one would pacify a child, and then she suddenly recovered all her usual gaiety and tenderness.

"Listen!" she cried; "I have a splendid idea. You shall choose whichever pleases you best, and I will take the other. We are cousins—almost sisters; it will be delicious! Besides, it is only fair that you should have the first choice; you are my superior in all respects. Yes, it is quite fair—perfectly right."

"My dearest Cécile, you are the sweetest girl in the world, but I really cannot accept your suggestion. Now you may make yourself quite easy. Neither of these gentlemen can be anything to me except as aspirants to your hand; such a character makes them absolutely indifferent to me, and would prevent me from the least shadow of *arrière pensée* or personal feeling towards them. Such thoughts as you would impute to me are, in my estimation, the greatest breach of friendship of which a girl can be guilty. Do you believe me? —are you now satisfied?"

"I *do* believe you, and I *adore* you. Come and continue your 'studies!'"

So we re-entered the drawing-room, where I did continue my studies, but in a more moderate manner, for zeal has its dangers, after all.

* * * * *

There go the chimes, ringing out from the old bell-tower. What a lovely night! and in the woods——

Good gracious, it is two o'clock in the morning! Are you not ashamed of yourself, miss, to be writing at such an hour?

CHAPTER V.

A MEETING. 12*th June.*

IF movement be synonymous with enjoyment, and if it is sufficient for amusement always to be "on the move," then I must say that I am enjoying myself immensely.

"What shall we do this morning? what shall we do this afternoon? what are we going to do this evening?" this is the refrain from day to day, so we make up parties and go riding, walking, or driving, without giving a thought to anything but our own amusement, laughing loudly in the highest spirits, and return again to the house, where our spirits do not desert us, but keep us company at table, in the dancing-room, while we sing, and our hilarity does not even leave us in the corridors as we go up to bed.

This morning early I wished to take a walk by myself in the park, and descended the staircase stealthily. I was just half-way down when I heard a peculiar sharp noise on the steps below me. This sound told me that M. de Louvercy was coming up to the library. I stopped suddenly, and was thinking of rushing back to my room, but there was not time—we met face to face. At this sudden meeting he became pale as a ghost, and made an effort to greet me, but in his embarrassment

he dropped that unfortunate crutch, which immediately rolled down the stairs. It is impossible for me to depict the deep distress which his poor wounded visage betrayed. The expression was a mixture of grief, humiliation, and rage. He grasped the banisters tightly with his right hand, while his mutilated left leg and arm hung helpless by his side.

I quickly descended the stairs, seized the crutch, and hastening back, placed it beneath his arm. Fixing his dark blue eyes upon me for a moment, he simply said—

"I thank you."

He then continued his way and I mine.

This little scene gave me a better idea of him. At first I had only wished to be spared the soldierly volleys of expletives of which he appeared so prodigal, but now, notwithstanding the involuntary antipathy with which all misshapen people inspire me, I was far from thinking him so repulsive as Cécile had represented. He has only one hand, to be sure, and one of his legs is almost paralysed, but his face is good and honest, and the light scar upon his forehead does not disfigure him in the least. He certainly has a wild sort of manner and a somewhat haggard look, but this may be due to the unkempt condition of his hair and his long (too long) pendent moustaches.

I went into the park, and Cécile, perceiving me from her window, very soon came bounding across the grass to join me. I told her of my meeting with her cousin.

"Oh, my gracious! how he must have sworn!"

"Not at all."

"You astonish me. I suppose it is because he expects his friend this evening."

"What friend?"

"Captain Eblis, you know."

"No, I do not know. Who is he?"

"I thought I had told you. It was he who saved Roger at Coulmiers. They have been sworn friends for a long time, ever since they left Saint Cyr. When poor Roger was so terribly wounded by the shell, Captain Eblis took him up in his arms as if he were a child, and carried him out from beneath the horses' feet in the midst of the battle. Was it not splendid of him? Ever since, Captain Eblis has been, in Roger's estimation, the perfection of everything which is good. He has even succeeded in reconciling Roger to life, and persuaded him to write the history of that terrible war. They are doing it together. Captain Eblis very often comes here and brings with him any documents that can be useful in compiling their book. He is himself very well read and very clever, and is a brigade-major. He is only thirty, and is very good-looking."

"Is he not the third string of your bow, my dear?" I inquired mischievously.

"Captain Eblis!" exclaimed Cécile. "Good gracious! I would as soon marry Croquemitaine. He is stern and fierce-looking. I like him, of course, because of his behaviour towards Roger, but we have only met two or three times. I look upon him as a child, and he regards me as a father might. But now, Charlotte, let us be serious. Don't you think it is time that we decided between MM. de Valnesse?"

"There is no hurry, I think."

"I beg your pardon."

"There is nothing disagreeable in your position with regard to those gentlemen."

"Oh, you think so really? And my poor tender heart, what have you to say about that?"

"Has it spoken?"

"No, but it wants to speak very much—it is burning to do so. Won't you help it to decide?"

I saw, nevertheless, that she was not very anxious about it, so I passed the subject by with a joke, and we returned to the château, whither the breakfast bell now summoned us.

The fact is, that to make a decision between these two candidates for Cécile's hand appears to me a very difficult matter. The result of my observation and information respecting them is at the same time satisfactory and embarrassing—satisfactory because they are both very superior young men, embarrassing from the fact that these qualities are balanced in both gentlemen. There is even a resemblance in their characters as well as in their personal appearance, and in their calibre of mind, which is sufficiently explained by their near relationship—in fact, I believe that they are both as good young men as can possibly be. They are good sons, possess good taste and amiability, and more than ordinary intelligence, very honourable, and delicate on any point of honour. Even in their rivalry they behave towards each other with a chivalrous courtesy which is quite pleasant to see.

I love Cécile so dearly that I should wish her to marry an absolutely perfect man if it were possible. But is it right to pursue an ideal which probably does not exist, when there are actually at hand two young men of the highest standard, and whose equals we may, perhaps, never meet? Has not every man, however superior to his fellow he may be, some faults of character to balance his good qualities? Is there not really more chance of happiness for a woman in the superior degree of excellence, so to speak, of the MM. de Valnesse, than in the more showy attributes of the highest grade?

My "restless conscience" tortured itself to solve these

important questions, involving as they did the happiness of one so dear to me; but I was particularly struck by the very calm way in which Cécile awaited my decision. I have never myself had such an experience, but I fancy that under the circumstances I should be somewhat less calm, and have a decided opinion upon the subject.

However, we shall see some day!

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW ARRIVAL. *Midnight.*

THIS evening has been somewhat less noisy than its predecessors. Captain Eblis has acted like a wet blanket, Cécile says, but I fancy he has given a more elevated tone to our little circle. I have often remarked the strange influence which is exercised upon people by the presence of a really distinguished man. He puts unconsciously a new spirit into everything. Whether he speak or not it is no matter; he is there, and that is sufficient. Everybody is improved more or less by contact with him, and appears to appreciate existence more highly. He establishes a more active current around him; the least incidents acquire an interest, while enjoyments seem more lasting. There is movement and happiness wherever he may be. We may feel somewhat relieved when he has taken his departure, but we regret his absence and feel smaller in consequence, and we fancy that our hearers no longer attach the same importance to what we say because he is not there to listen, nor to what one does because he knows nothing about it.

This afternoon M. de Louvercy drove to the station in his dog-cart to meet Captain Eblis. Partly from curiosity and partly by chance, I happened to be in my

dressing-room when they arrived. I drew back the curtain as they entered the courtyard. Captain Eblis jumped lightly down from the dog-cart and laughingly held out his arms to M. de Louvercy, who, laughing also, sprang out and was tenderly assisted to alight by his friend. This incident reminded me somewhat touchingly of the terrible scene at Coulmiers, and I liked to picture to myself the violent emotions and the heroic fever burning, during the battle, on those faces now so smiling and so cheerful.

Captain Eblis dined with us; he is a man of middle height and of somewhat stiff manner, with that quiet ease which characterises military men. I must confess that at first sight his face struck me as somewhat severe and hard. His features were good but cold, his face was much burnt, he wore thick moustaches, his eyes were dark and soft. These characteristics were almost immediately discernible, and not altogether pleasing at first sight. But when he smiled, was it ever so little, an expression of real goodness lighted up his countenance, and induced you to trust him thoroughly. His voice is singularly sweet and musical, and after a few minutes' conversation all fear of him vanishes. It is both very surprising and very charming to hear these musical tones penetrate through such thick moustaches.

I had the pleasure of speaking to him frequently during dinner. We were both very silent at first. I was somewhat shy, and he, perhaps, on his part, was not more brave than I—for after all, if he has a severe expression I have one also at times, and I have frequently remarked that I rather intimidate my partners at first—but at length all of a sudden he broke the ice.

"I heard of you to-day, mademoiselle," he said.

"How was that?" I inquired.

"I know, at any rate, that you are very compassionate towards the weak and suffering."

"I beg your pardon," I said.

"You were very kind this morning to my friend Roger. I heard as much."

"Any one would have done the same under the circumstances."

"No doubt, but it is not the kindness, but the manner of doing it, that is appreciated."

I told him I felt flattered by his good opinion, because he himself is so thoroughly good-natured, and would know so well in what real kindness consisted, inasmuch as he had been as much assistance to M. Louvercy as I could ever hope to be.

He bowed, and resumed in a sorrowful yet very pleasing tone—

"I do not know whether I did render him such a great service, after all, in saving his life."

We then plunged into conversation, and conversed gaily of our mutual likes and dislikes, and particularly upon Wagner's music, which he likes and which I do not care for.

We were unfortunately interrupted by one of Cécile's strange tricks. Her great ambition is to make the curate laugh when he is drinking, and on this occasion she had got the idea into her head to put two cherries on one stalk across her nose, and pouted out her pretty lips to keep them in their place. Everybody laughed, and MM. de Valnesse were enthusiastic. Then Cécile, calling a servant to separate the cherries, put each of them on a plate and directed him to take one to M. Henri de Valnesse and the other to his brother.

While these gentlemen were proudly fastening these cherries into the buttonholes of their coats respectively, Captain Eblis was regarding the scene with wide-open eyes. Cécile perceived his astonishment, and, addressing him with her usual mixture of naïveté and boldness, said—

"You appear surprised, Captain Eblis."

"Not at all, mademoiselle."

"I beg your pardon, I thought you looked so. Come, now, be frank with me. My little joke appeared to you in bad taste—is it not so?"

"Mademoiselle, everything you do is perfectly charming."

"No, you are quite right. It is bad taste on my part, but I will give you a little insight into my character. My disposition is very mixed, so to speak, and you must understand that I am a compound of half angel and half devil."

"In that case, mademoiselle, you will have a great many companions. We all of us have an angel which strives more or less to make us listen to him, and an evil spirit which is endeavouring to stifle its utterances. In any case, the devil which only tempts you to put cherries across your nose cannot be such a very bad fellow after all."

"Thank you, Captain Eblis," replied Cécile; "you have administered the medicine in the jam very cleverly, but the dose is there nevertheless. As I told your charming neighbour this morning, you are quite a father to me."

Captain Eblis bowed and smiled, and then resumed his conversation with me. If I could trust certain indications, I should say that this valiant soldier is, as they put in epitaphs, "as good a son as he was a faithful friend." He has a grave and tender way of speaking of his mother which is very charming. The words "my mother" are very often on his lips—"It is on my mother's account," "My mother wishes it," "That will please my mother," and so on. Once even in an unguarded moment he let slip the word "Mamma," but, blushing faintly, he corrected himself, yet this infantine appellation pronounced by his sympathetic voice was not without its charm.

After dinner Cécile approached Captain Eblis, and, holding out her hand to him with her unequalled grace of manner, begged to conclude a peace with him. They chatted for a long time in a corner, and frequently looked in my direction as if their conversation referred to me. Later in the evening, as Cécile passed by me she whispered—

"My dear, you have made havoc of the brigade-major's heart."

But I had no wish to play havoc with the brigade-major's feelings, unless that term signifies that we are sympathetic, and then I confess I am glad to hear it.

The next moment I was requested to sing something. I have a fair and well-cultivated mezzo-soprano voice, but I do not care much to sing in public. My friends are aware of this, and as a rule do not press me to perform. Nevertheless, on this occasion I consented, and sang "Casta diva" from *Norma*.

My surprise was great, and my mortification not less, when I saw that after I had been singing a short time Captain Eblis quietly opened the door and went out of the room. I did not think this at all polite of him, but I did not the less continue to sing my best, and the song came to a termination amid a flattering murmur of applause, in the midst of which Captain Eblis returned, and, coming close to me—

"Mademoiselle," he said, indicating a window which had been opened on account of the sultriness of the evening, "Roger is lying on a seat in the court yonder, and he will be infinitely obliged to you if you will sing that song again."

I assented most willingly, and gave the air with all my heart.

I was well recompensed for my trouble. Madame Louvercy, who was seated by the window while I sang, went out as soon as I rose from the piano, and exchanged

a few words with her son. When she returned she came towards me, and, taking my hands in hers, kissed me warmly. Then in a broken voice she said—

"Thank you for him and for myself. It is the first occasion for a very long time that I have seen him happy."

It is indeed a success to have drawn this wild man out of his den, and I am very proud of it. I shall now go to sleep with the consciousness of having done a good action.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOW OF CUPID. *25th June.*

FOR eight or ten days I have written nothing in my diary. I have been rather scrupulous. I have feared to give substance to my ideas by placing them on paper, and have been afraid to embody my impressions, which I would prefer to put aside altogether, if that were possible. It is my grandmother who unconsciously encourages me to continue my confidential relations with my brass-bound journal.

When I went into my grandmother's room this morning she embraced me more tenderly than usual, and taking one of my hands in both of hers she said—

"Have you nothing to tell me, my child?"

"I think I have, grandmamma."

"Ah! Captain Eblis has been paying court to you, has he not?"

"I do not know if he has been paying court to me, dear grandmamma, for he has never said a word which could be in any way construed into a declaration, but he appears to like my society; he talks to me with a mixture of respect, confidence, and timidity which I do not perceive in other people. He addresses conversation directly to me, and never appears to forget what I said to him; he seems to treasure my words. If that is

paying court to a woman, I really think that he is paying court to me a little.

"I have remarked it," replied my grandmother gravely; "and does his conduct annoy you?"

"Not at all."

"Naturally not, but I suppose that you are not very much smitten yet?"

"Smitten? No!"

"He simply pleases you a little by his attention?"

"Yes—a little."

"Yes, and he pleases me too. Listen, my dear child. We have not come here to seek a husband for you, but if we should find one we might as well take him here as elsewhere—don't you think so? Only you understand, my dear, that an affair of this kind is a very serious thing, and we should think twice about it. For my own part, as soon as I had seen a little of this gentleman I made some inquiries concerning him, and the result has been satisfactory—— One moment, my dear child. Do not interrupt me. You must quite understand that neither my opinion nor that of others is intended to influence your personal decision in any way. I merely tell you that there are no objections as far as I am aware, that's all; his family, reputation, even his fortune, are very good; but notwithstanding all this, I hope, my darling, that you will not yield too quickly or too lightly to first impressions. Take time to reflect. I know you so well, my child, that I am sure you will be very unhappy indeed if you cannot be quite happy. You are one of those natures which cannot love twice, and it is very necessary that there should be no mistake. When you have once loved the love will remain, and will never quit the throne of your heart except with your life."

The angel within me, as Cécile might have said, had long been hinting to me all these truths which my

grandmother now expressed, and had put me on my guard. I knew that my first love would be the only one—all-powerful, eternal for time and for eternity.

These are but phrases, but I mean them all the same.

The dream of my heart is to love a man who deserves all my esteem, all my affection, and all my respect, and to be loved by him in return.

Is it, then, true, really true, that I am very near the attainment of my ideal? We shall see presently.

It is not astonishing that a man of Captain Eblis's attainments and manner should reach the standard of a woman's ambition. What young girl would not feel herself honoured by such attention as his, and who would not find a singular pleasure in daily intercourse with his superior intelligence and cultivated mind? Who would not be happy at the thought of exchanging a desultory intimacy for an eternal union with such a man? Such a wish would be simple and natural on her part.

But what appears to me, unfortunately, much less natural and more doubtful, is that a man of Captain Eblis's calibre, who, I imagine, can choose as he pleases, should be seriously attached in such a short time to this pale and romantic Charlotte. One easily believes what one wishes, but may I not be deceiving myself? Is it not possible that I am the dupe of a few acts of politeness which might as well have been addressed to anybody else? Perhaps he may notice that Cécile is much occupied, and receives a great deal of attention, while I am comparatively neglected. He may, therefore, merely pay me these attentions out of a sort of good-natured pity.

Is that all? No, I don't think he is capable of so disturbing a woman's mind just for the sake of a temporary distraction.

But how is it possible that I can have pleased him?

What attractions do I possess? If I possess any, I am not aware of them. I do not make confidences easily, and I do not tell him anything I ought not to tell him, nor do I gossip.

I know, of course, that I am fairly good-looking, and no doubt at first sight that is an attraction, even to a man like him. But if it is only that, how many women much more beautiful than I must he have met in his life!

I fancy, upon thinking it over, that my chief attraction in his eyes, and that which, perhaps, has won his sympathy, is my compassion for his friend Roger. It is evident to me that his affection for M. de Louvercy is a passion which dominates all others, and that he is likely to love every one who flatters it. Ever since he has been here I have unconsciously been cherishing this weakness of his, and have often, perhaps, touched this very sensitive point in his heart.

You must know that, thanks to the affectionate influence of Captain Eblis, M. Roger has for the last few days joined us at meals. On the first occasion he astonished everybody and delighted his mother by his appearance. She was fairly overcome. He had been very careful with his dress and appearance. His pale but fine features had lost their stern expression, and lighted up considerably in our society, although the slightest allusion to his infirmities would cause him to frown angrily—as, for instance, when he was obliged to seek assistance to seat himself at, or to rise from, the table. It was on these occasions that I took the opportunity to let him see the pity with which his condition inspired me. Usually after dinner he would go and seat himself for a few moments on one of the benches in the garden. The other evening Cécile and I noticed that he appeared uncomfortable, and she ran to fetch a pile of cushions from the drawing-room, which she passed to me through the window. Captain Eblis,

whom I asked to assist me, tried to place them so as to sustain the wounded arm and leg, but he did it so awkwardly that I laughingly scolded him for his *gaucherie*, and I said to M. de Louvercy—

"Will you allow me to arrange them for you?"

So I adjusted the cushions with the natural tact of a woman, and as M. de Louvercy thanked me somewhat stiffly, Captain Eblis said gaily—

"What a capital hospital nurse she would make, Roger, wouldn't she?"

Captain Eblis appeared to me more grateful for these simple attentions to his friend than for those of which he himself is more directly the object. On such occasions he looks at me, I fancy, in an almost affectionate way. On the other hand, the feelings which he might have towards me do not betray themselves except by very slight expressions of gratitude, and by the evident pleasure with which he seems to seek my society and conversation. Is it wise that I should permit myself to nourish this predilection, which is at present merely a fancy, but which in a short time, if I give way to it, may prove an all-absorbing passion?

CHAPTER VIII.

A MOONLIGHT STROLL. *5th July.*

I GOT up at seven o'clock this morning, after an almost sleepless night, and resolved to do something extraordinary. So I put my cherished Diary under my arm, and with my umbrella and small writing-case in my hand, I left the north tower by the south door.

Immediately opposite this door is the great avenue, from the left side of which a winding path leads to a shrubbery, and in the shrubbery are a few statues—Ceres, Flora, and Pomona—a rustic table and three chairs. This is a charming spot, particularly on such a lovely morning as this is. There is a dim religious light around me; the foliage is so thick, and the branches of the trees interlace so persistently, that one can scarcely see the sky through the waving screen overhead. Quaint moving patterns are thrown in shadows upon the paths, on the chairs, upon the goddesses, and resemble the painted windows of a church. A faint odour of oranges and roses fills the air, and, to crown all, the gentle murmur of a brook is heard as it ripples along to feed the pond wherein the swans disport themselves; and then passes away, I know not where. It is impossible to say how the idea came into the mind of this Charlotte

d'Erra—my unworthy self—to choose such a place to write the account of what happened last night. Perhaps she wishes to inscribe, thus surrounded by the golden sunlight and by the rich scents of flowers, a simple episode in the life of a young girl—which may become —if God will it—the first page in the life of a woman.

Yesterday after dinner we all, as usual, went out into the courtyard to enjoy the fresh evening air, which was more or less mingled with the perfume of cigars. M. de Louvercy was smoking as he reclined upon his favourite bench in the midst of the cushions that we had arranged for his comfort. Cécile, who is always restless, took it into her head to play with her cousin's crutch. She first examined it timidly. Then, getting bolder, she began to play with it as with a toy gun. Her father had promised to send her a light fowling-piece, with which she proposes to shoot all the rabbits and all the squirrels in the neighbourhood. In the meantime she began to practise with the crutch, and presented it at MM. de Valnesse, who, on this occasion, represented the rabbits. I saw that M. Roger was knitting his brows, while Captain Eblis bit his moustache in vexation, and I therefore looked warningly at Cécile, but might have spared myself the trouble. Encouraged by the openly-expressed admiration of the young men, she proceeded to more extravagant antics, and at length, placing the crutch beneath her arm, she hobbled about in imitation of her poor cousin. She advanced a few steps in this manner across the courtyard, very seriously and apparently maliciously, but in reality, she says, only to ascertain whether it was a very uncomfortable way to proceed. M. de Louvercy pretended to smile, but he was very angry indeed. I saw so much, and ran to Cécile to warn her, but Captain Eblis anticipated me. He hurried up to her and said a few words to her, which I did not hear, but her reply was distinctly audible.

"Scolding again!" she said.

"I think this time you deserve it," he replied.

She appeared to hesitate a moment between the good and the evil spirit; then she returned quickly towards the house and placed the crutch tenderly upon the seat again, and detaching a sprig of jessamine from a branch which twines around the windows, she placed it in the buttonhole of her cousin's coat, saying—

"There is a nice flower for you, cousin!"

M. Roger snatched the flower away and threw it upon the ground.

"You are a fool!" he exclaimed; and, rising from his seat as he spoke, he bowed to me and entered his own apartments.

As soon as he disappeared Cécile clasped her hands and shrugged her shoulders.

"He will kill me some day!" she exclaimed.

She then dropped into the seat her cousin had just vacated, and, burying her face in her hands, we heard her sob violently.

M. d'Eblis exchanged glances with me and smiled; then, bending over Cécile, he said—

"This excessive sorrow, mademoiselle, for such a slight error is childish. Do not give way so." Then he added as he stooped and picked up the flower, "Shall I carry your gift to him?"

Still weeping she signified her assent, and then she raised her head, and, smiling through her tears at Captain Eblis, she said—

"You are always acting the part of a father towards me."

We then walked away a little to allow her to recover herself. All the other guests were walking about in little groups, chatting and enjoying the beauty of the evening. It was certainly most beautiful. The full moon shone in unclouded splendour in the pure vault of

blue, and threw a silver sheen upon the pool in which the swans were sleeping peacefully, wrapped in their snowy plumes.

Captain Eblis and I, talking upon indifferent subjects, wandered backwards and forwards between the pond and the avenue, which, in the midst of the moonlight, was still as dark as a cathedral at midnight.

After a pause I said to Captain Eblis—

"Such a scene as this—so peaceful and soothing in all its details—must present a great contrast to your late experiences in the war; is it not so?"

He stopped suddenly and replied—

"You must possess the gift of second-sight, mademoiselle!"

"I scarcely possess the gift of first-sight," I replied, laughing, "for I am very short-sighted. But why do you say so?"

"Because at the very moment you spoke I was thinking of an evening during the war, just such an evening as this, which, though less pleasant, was equally peaceful."

"Can you tell me about it?"

He hesitated, sighed, and then bowing slightly, said—

"Certainly. I was then at Metz. On the evening to which I refer, the 27th of October, I was charged with the delivery of a message which did not appear to me quite clear. I had to interrupt the march of a certain regiment—I forget the number. I had done so, and was about to retrace my steps. I waited only until my horse was rested. We were then close to a village, called Colomberg, I believe. The storms which had so lately devastated the district had by that time abated, and the moon shone tranquilly upon the half-inundated country. Imagination plays us strange tricks. There is certainly little in common between the sumptuousness

of our present surroundings and the desolation of those marshes; nevertheless, the moonlight shimmering upon the pond yonder recalled that other evening, and the sleeping swans made me think of my escort of dragoons sitting motionless wrapped in their white cloaks.

"The regiment kept its formation pending further orders, and was standing at ease. The bivouac fires had been lighted, around which some officers were assembled, talking in low and mournful tones: Rumours of capitulation had been current since the day before. The colonel, a grizzled old warrior, paced backwards and forwards at a little distance, clutching in his hand the orders I had brought. Suddenly he approached me, and, seizing me by the arm, said in a manner which was almost insulting—

"'Captain, two words with you; you have come from head-quarters; you know more about the facts than I do. This is the end, is it not?'

"I replied that I believed it was.

"'You believe it! How can you believe such a thing?'

"He thrust back my arm with a violent gesture and turned away, then retracing his steps quickly, he said—

"'We are prisoners, then?'

"'I fear so, colonel.'

"There was another pause. He remained for some moments buried in deep thought; then looking up, he said in a voice struggling with emotion—

"'And the colours?'

"'I do not know about that, colonel.'

"'Ah, you do not know, eh?'

"He resumed his solitary promenade for five or six minutes; then advancing to the front of the regiment, he cried out—

"'The colours!'

"The ensign who carried them stepped forward.

The colonel, seizing the staff in one hand and extending the other towards the drummers, said—

"'Beat the assembly.'

"He then approached the fire, holding the colours high above his head. Resting the staff upon the ground, he looked round and took off his *kepi*. They all followed his example; the regiment looked on amid a breathless silence.

"There was one moment of hesitation. I saw the colonel's lips tremble; his eyes were fixed with an agonised expression upon the glorious silk banner now torn and disfigured—a type of our unhappy France. But he recovered himself, and, bending upon one knee, he let the eagle drop slowly into the flames. A tongue of fire leaped up and illuminated the countenances of the officers. They were weeping!

"'Beat the ruffle,' cried the colonel, and the melancholy roll of the drums, half-muffled by the wet, resounded through the night air.

"The colonel put on his *kepi*, and coming up to me, said, in a stern tone—

"'Captain, when you return you need have no scruples in relating what you have witnessed. I salute you!'

"'Colonel,' I said, 'will you permit me the honour of embracing you?"

"He threw himself upon my neck. 'Ah, my poor child, my darling child,' I heard him murmur."

At this point of his narrative Captain Eblis turned away his head, and I fancy I heard a stifled sob. I could not resist touching his hand. He appeared astonished, but he seized it and pressed it warmly.

"You understand, then, all we went through in those terrible moments?"

"Yes," I replied.

But as I attempted to withdraw my hand he gently retained it.

"If anything in this world could efface the memory of that evening it would be a moment such as this," he murmured.

I made no reply, and he released my hand. After a silence of a few minutes I said—

"Shall we go in now?"

"As you please," he replied sadly.

And we entered the house.

That is all that passed. But from such a man as he is, is it not a great deal—nay, everything? When I recall his words, when I read them over again, they appear almost insignificant, but it was the tone of his voice, the deep, the tender, the touching accents which said so much. Was it not the offer of a heart? Truly I believe it was, and, if I can judge by my own feelings, it needed but that moment, that one instant, for our souls to meet in sympathy, and to be united for time and for eternity. Oh, Heaven! I trust it may be so. God grant that I do not deceive myself!

CHAPTER IX.

A LITTLE CLOUD—LIKE A MAN'S HAND.

13th July.

I HAVE not had the courage to take up my pen for some days. I do not know what has happened, but some evil genius has passed over the château, and has suddenly changed us all—every one but me!

The first symptoms of this extraordinary change manifested themselves on that very same evening when I felt so happy, but I am afraid the impression was deceptive.

When I left M. d'Eblis on that occasion and rejoined Cécile I could perceive that she was cross with me, and I inquired the reason. As usual, she pretended to refuse to tell, but when I insisted she drew me aside beneath the lilacs, and declared in the most serious way that I was a false friend—that I was entirely neglecting her interests, that I had betrayed her confidence—that I was amusing myself all the while she was oscillating between the two aspirants to her hand in a situation which was at once humiliating and ridiculous—and so forth.

I bent my head before this storm, and even acknowledged to myself that I had in a measure deserved reproach, for certainly lately I had been more interested

about my own affairs than about hers. I accordingly did my best to soothe her by pleading the difficulty of choosing for her, and promised to have a final interview with her very soon, in which I would endeavour to fix our irresolution.

But it seems that at the same moment a much graver quarrel was proceeding between Captain Eblis and M. de Louvercy. On what grounds? No one can tell me anything about it. I can only gather from Madame de Chagres that M. de Louvercy, who had gone in after his little "tiff" with Cécile, very soon came out again; that he had accosted Captain Eblis immediately after he and I parted, and had gone down the avenue with him engaged in earnest conversation. Thence high words had been overheard, and Madame de Chagres told me that M. de Louvercy appeared in a furious and childish passion. The disputants were subsequently seen to return to the house, the invalid leaning upon Captain Eblis more heavily than usual. A short time afterwards Madame de Louvercy was hastily summoned to her son's apartments, where he had fallen down in a fit. He did not appear amongst us for two or three days in consequence.

Captain Eblis also deserted us. He spent the time with his sick friend or walked about in the fields alone, and only joined us at meals. He is remarkably *triste* and silent, and his behaviour towards me betrays embarrassment; he is cold, and his coldness nevertheless appears to be assumed. If it were *possible* to imagine that his quarrel with M. de Louvercy had in any way referred to me, I should be inclined to attribute his behaviour to that cause. But such a supposition is preposterous and quite inadmissible. However, no matter what the cause of their disagreement may have been, it has now entirely been removed. Their reconciliation is more complete than ever, and their friend-

ship has been cemented by stronger bonds than before. This is particularly observable in the manner of M. Roger, who treats Captain Eblis with the most affectionate courtesy, as if he had done something for which he sought his friend's forgiveness. It is evident that the offence proceeded from M. de Louvercy. But what *was* the offence?

Madame de Louvercy is apparently in the secret, for she is more thoughtful than usual. This preoccupation is infectious, for my grandmother is also very thoughtful, and the MM. de Valnesse and their sisters also keep very much to themselves.

I will not dwell upon my own feelings. I was in the seventh heaven. I have fallen suddenly to the earth; my wings have been clipped! That is all.

I try to school myself to forget that radiant dream of an hour. But I cannot, and I am very much afraid that I never shall succeed in eradicating it from my memory.

CHAPTER X.

THE MAID WITH THE MILKING-PAIL.

22nd July.

PERHAPS I have been too hasty to despair as I have done. It appears to me that things are again resuming their usual course. Captain Eblis had certainly felt very much annoyed, and at first could not get over it. But it seems that now he has entirely recovered his usual elasticity of spirits, and has resumed his pleasant chats with me, but at the same time when he is with me I am conscious of a sadness and restraint in his manner. But, notwithstanding his grave manner, he has a fund of gaiety in his disposition, upon which Cécile is continually drawing. She both interests and amuses him, and while he blames he cannot help liking her caprice and lively gracefulness, which, with a strong leaven of mischief, is the foundation of her character.

Yesterday morning, for instance, she made up her mind to go shooting in the wood. We all accompanied her. Captain Eblis, as a soldier, was obliged to lead this dangerous expedition. The rabbits were running about in the wood like mice in a granary. It is hardly necessary to say that Cécile did not kill a single rabbit, but, by way of compensation, she very

nearly wounded the MM. Valnesse, who endeavoured to climb up the trees whenever she brought the fowling-piece to her shoulder.

As we were returning from this fruitless expedition against the rabbits, Cécile suddenly noticed a milkpail in the meadow close by.

"Oh, look!" she cried; "there is a pail all by itself in the grass."

Vexed by her want of success with the rabbits, she was immediately possessed with the magnificent idea of taking her revenge upon the unfortunate milking-pail. So, bringing her gun quickly to her shoulder, she fired.

"I have hit it!" she exclaimed.

And, in fact, the pail was upset, and a stream of milk ran upon the ground. At the same moment the milkmaid, whom we none of us had seen, as she was fastening the gate, appeared quickly in the path. She was a young peasant girl about twelve years of age, with fair hair, and as soon as she perceived the disaster that had happened to her pail she began to cry, and stammered out that her mother would punish her for the loss of the milk.

"No, no," exclaimed Cecile; "do not be afraid. I will pay you for the milk."

As she spoke she hurried forward, and, perceiving that the overturned pail still contained a considerable quantity of milk, she exclaimed—

"How fortunate! I am as thirsty as a wolf."

She bent down, and, raising the pail carefully, drank freely of the contents. Then she stopped to take breath, and, perceiving the looks of admiration with which we all regarded her—for she certainly did look very charming—she smiled bewitchingly.

"Quite a Greuze," she said.

She then drank a little more milk. When her thirst

was appeased there was still some milk left in the vessel.

"What shall we do with this?" she said.

M. de Valnesse (the dark one) seized the jug enthusiastically and put it to his lips.

"That is twenty francs!" cried Cécile.

The young man took his purse from his pocket and laughingly gave her the money. M. de Valnesse (the fair one) then took his turn.

"Twenty francs for you," said Cécile.

"It is now your turn, Captain Eblis," she cried.

"I do not care for milk, mademoiselle," he replied, "but here are my twenty francs."

Cecile then put the three louis in the hands of the little milkmaid.

"There, my love," she said, "don't cry any more," and she kissed her demonstratively on both cheeks.

We continued our walk. Cécile was a little thoughtful for a short time. Then, addressing Captain Eblis, she said suddenly—

"Why would you not drink after me, Captain Eblis?"

"Because, mademoiselle, as I have already had the honour to tell you, I do not like milk."

"Now don't tell me a falsehood! It was meant for another lecture. When we come to tea we will chalk it up. But, after all, we need not quarrel about it, for, to speak seriously, I feel that I improve in your society, and if you continue this discipline a little longer I have no doubt I shall turn out perfection."

There was doubtless more truth in this than appeared on the surface. Cécile had a great respect for Captain Eblis, and was very circumspect in his presence. She watched his expression almost in spite of herself, and frequently checked some little practical joke when she saw the least trace of disapprobation on his countenance, and while endeavouring to have her own way

she recognised the master hand, and obeyed it. In short, like everybody else, she submitted to his firmness of character and to his somewhat disdainful but high-toned mind. The society of Captain Eblis, if she were able to profit by it, would, no doubt, be salutary. I think that he and I are the only two in the world who possess such an influence over her. Ah! if ever—if ever the dream which I cherish so fondly shall be realised, this darling girl, enwrapped in our affection and under our influence, will become, as she said, perfection, and if so, the most lovable of "perfection!"

CHAPTER XI.

A REVELATION. *26th July.*

I AM still feeling very much upset by a conversation which I have had with Cécile. Feeling somewhat guilty at the reproaches she addressed to me the other day, I have been giving all my attention to the relative merits of the MM. de Valnesse, and after much reflection I have decided strongly in favour of M. René, who appears to me much more intelligent and more cultivated than his cousin Henri.

Just now, after breakfast, I whispered mysteriously to Cécile that I had something to say to her.

"Oh, very well," she replied carelessly. "What is it about?"

"Why, about that which interests you so deeply."

"Nothing interests me deeply. However, let us hear it."

Somewhat surprised at this opening, I induced her to come with me into the park.

"Well, my darling," I said, "my decision is made."

"I must say you have taken your time about it."

"The choice is more likely to be correct," I replied, laughing.

I then told her my reasons for having been so long

in deciding, and detailed to her the advantages which I considered M. René possessed over his cousin.

She listened to what I had to say, but with a peculiar air of indifference, and when I had finished she said—

"That is rather unfortunate, for I prefer the other."

"Which other?"

"Why, M. Henri, of course."

"The evil is not very great, my child, for, as I have told you, I do not perceive any very great difference between the two gentlemen, and where both are so nearly balanced in every respect it is evident that your personal taste should turn the scale."

"So you think of marrying M. René, then?" Cécile replied.

"He does not care about me in the least!"

"But you would marry him if you were free to do so?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not love him."

"That is to say that he is not good enough for you, but quite good enough for me."

"My dearest," I replied quietly, "if you wish we will resume this conversation when you are in a better humour."

"No," she cried, swinging her umbrella backwards and forwards as she spoke, "but it is most mortifying to see the determination which you all have to get rid of me—my father, my aunt, and even you. However, I am not your slave; people are not married by force, and I tell you plainly, my dear, as I shall tell my father and my aunt, that I do not want to be married."

"There can be nothing more easy, my child."

"I would a hundred times rather enter a convent."

"Excuse me, my dear," I replied, "it is not a

convent you ought to be sent to, but a lunatic asylum. In the meantime I will retire to my room."

I turned to leave her, for my patience, which is by no means easily worn out, was quite exhausted, but she held me back.

"Charlotte," she cried, "do not abandon me. I am very unhappy."

In her old affectionate manner she threw herself into my arms.

I was deeply troubled, for the words "I am unhappy" had raised a sudden fear within me.

"But now," I whispered, "tell me what is the matter with you, after all."

She bent her head down, and in broken sentences replied—

"Nothing—nothing. I don't know—I really don't know."

When I saw that she had recovered herself a little I pressed her with questions. She looked at me steadily for a moment as if she was on the point of confiding some secret to me; then she sighed, but did not speak.

At length she was able to give me an explanation, which amounted to this:—

Whenever a marriage is talked of for her she regards it with the carelessness of a child, but whenever it seems likely to become an accomplished fact she begins to comprehend the serious character of the step, and recoils before the arrangement which would decide the happiness or misery of her future life. She ended by begging me to leave her some few days longer to reflect.

I merely replied that I thought she was subjecting hese gentlemen to a very long probation, and that if she did not quickly show a preference for one or the other they might both take their departure some fine morning.

"Well, then," said Cécile, "I will wish them *bon voyage*."

We entered the house, and I immediately came up into my room, for I was glad of the opportunity to be alone to calm myself and collect my thoughts.

I feel thoroughly upset. It is not possible to mistake Cécile. There is but one interpretation to her sudden indifference towards the MM. de Valnesse. She loves, or thinks she loves, Captain Eblis. That is her secret! Great heavens! is it possible! Of all the griefs which could possibly come upon me, or of all the afflictions which I could imagine, this will assuredly be the most bitter. A rivalry, a jealousy between Cécile and me—a combat in which I must either sacrifice my most cherished friendship or my love. What a trial this is! and I cannot even pray to be delivered from it, for it has already come upon me—it exists.

I have done my best. I have tried with all my strength to elevate my thoughts, for I cannot bear to think that two women should love him at the same time. It must not be. All that I can do I will do, and that is to bear myself loyally in this terrible conflict, and not to utter a word which might separate me from Cécile or serve myself; to linger on, with a broken heart indeed, but with the testimony of a good conscience, and let him choose between us. If he should finally choose me, Cécile will suffer cruelly, poor girl; nevertheless, I believe, indeed I know, that she, so gay, so tender, and yet so light-hearted, will eventually console herself for the loss.

I, never!

From the outset he appeared to prefer me to her A woman is never mistaken on such a point; besides, my grandmother remarked it, and then at length, although I may be far below his standard, there appears to me to be more sympathy between him and

me. Ever since that happy evening when we seemed to understand each other so well, it is true I have noticed that he has been colder and more reserved towards me, but he has had something on his mind. He has appeared somewhat more occupied, or rather more curious, about Cécile, but I believe she only amuses him. However, who can tell? Ah! my poor darling, what wrong you have done me!

They are calling me to go for our afternoon walk. Captain Eblis will accompany us. Now that my eyes are open, the most trivial circumstance, the smallest detail, will be to me a revelation.

CHAPTER XII.

AN ADVENTURE.

The same evening.

IN the course of our drive this afternoon a strange adventure befell Cécile. About two o'clock we started in the carriage to pay a visit to the Curé of Louvercy, who had organised a fishing party for us. His house, which is close to the church, is situated on the bank of a stream which is, I think, an affluent of the Eure. Half our party went into the garden, which descends to the river, and then began to fish. Captain Eblis, Madame de Chagres, her husband, and myself remained in the cemetery, which is one of the prettiest little village churchyards which can possibly be imagined. The church itself, hidden among the trees, is a perfect gem of the fifteenth century architecture. Captain Eblis was anxious to make a sketch of it, so they brought us out chairs, and we sat in the circle watching him and admiring the play of sunlight upon the stream and trees. There is at the end of a path leading away from the cemetery an old wooden bridge which crosses the river, and on the other side right opposite is a rocky hill crowned with verdure. This was the prospect that we were admiring on this glorious afternoon.

Cécile soon joined us, for she was apparently tired of

fishing, and also, perhaps, missed Captain Eblis from her side. She came towards us in a series of bounds, and then she ran about the little cemetery reading the epitaphs half aloud, but her attention was quickly absorbed by one object, and that was a ready-made grave, for a death had taken place in the village, and no doubt the funeral was appointed for to-morrow morning. This open grave interested Cécile in an extraordinary manner, and after approaching it several times with mingled curiosity and fear she got bolder and bent forward to look down to the bottom of it. But that was a difficult matter because of the sloping mounds of loose gravel and earth which had been dug out. Nevertheless she persisted, and in order to sustain herself she caught hold of the branch of a cypress-tree which was growing close by, and, leaning with the other hand upon her sunshade, we saw her bend her pliant bust over the grave and look into it eagerly. Captain Eblis had perceived her, and in a second had seized the whole surrounding. Her pretty figure in the full sunlight bent over that dark and sinister-looking tomb, that young and fresh face, half-smiling, half-terrified, he quickly turned over a leaf of his sketch-book in order to seize the incident, but suddenly rising he called out—

"Take care, mademoiselle! Good heavens! mind what you are about!"

We all rose at the same moment. The cypress to which Cécile was clinging had been partially undermined by the sexton. It yielded, and, bending forward, she lost her equilibrium, uttered a loud scream, and with extended arms fell into the open grave.

We hurried to her assistance, penetrated by a feeling which it is difficult to describe. For my own part I felt frozen with terror, as if struck by a bolt of ice. We very soon reached the grave. The poor girl had

recovered herself, and was now standing upright at the bottom of the grave. Her hair was dishevelled, she looked completely lost, and regarded us with a vacant smile. The MM. de Valnesse had also run up when they had heard her scream. Everybody made suggestions at the same time, and simultaneously proposed plans for getting her out of the grave. We held out our hands to her, but in vain, for the grave was too deep. Some of the gentlemen said that cords would be necessary to extricate her, others suggested chairs or a ladder; meanwhile Cécile appeared to be in such a nervous condition that delay was dangerous.

But now the calm and commanding voice of Captain Eblis silenced all the rest.

"Now, mademoiselle," he said, "don't you be foolish; this is an unfortunate accident, but if you retain your presence of mind you will be taken out in a moment. I am pretty strong, as you shall see. Now allow me to pass my hands beneath your arms."

He knelt down in the sloping *débris*, and smilingly raised Cécile by the shoulders, at the same time gradually recovering his perpendicular, until at last he stood upright beside the grave. Then she gave way and fainted in his arms, where she lay without movement and as pale as death.

"It is not desirable that she should regain consciousness just here," said Captain Eblis; "I will carry her into the field yonder, which looks much more cheerful."

So he left the cemetery, carrying the inanimate body of Cécile clasped to his breast. We made way for him, and when he had placed Cécile on the fragrant herbage she opened her eyes and gazed round wildly for a second or two. Then suddenly memory returned, and smiling upon him she said—

"Always a father to me."

Her eyes again closed, and she fainted once more.

Water was brought and we bathed her temples, and after loosening her corsage she returned to consciousness. A quarter of an hour later we returned to the château. As we drove back we pretended to make light of the affair without succeeding in removing the superstitious impression which had seized upon Cécile, for although she tried to laugh with us she was very pale and very thoughtful.

But nevertheless this lugubrious incident may, perhaps, eventually be advantageous to her. I was close to Captain Eblis while he was carrying her in his arms, and I could not but observe the expression of his face as he bent over the pretty, lifeless form. His features betrayed not only sympathy and pity, but a more tender admiration. There is no doubt in this same weakness of this delicate girl an unconscious demand for protection which appealed strongly to such a noble heart as his.

Ah! my Cécile, Providence is on your side evidently.

* * * * * *

30th July.

THERE is nothing new to write about. Cécile appears to be more and more under the influence of Captain Eblis, and everybody is beginning to remark it. As for him, I do not know what to think—he is a riddle. He certainly in his manner towards Cécile betrays an amused curiosity, an interest, and even affection, but as far as I can see no passion, nothing, if I may dare to say so, of the regard which I have formerly so often perceived in his manner to me, and which even still I believe he cannot control at times. In his very voice, when he addresses me, there is a thrill which is not observable when he speaks to Cécile. What conflict can be raging in his heart?

I took a walk this morning in the park, and put this question to myself, and I confess that as I did so I could not help crying a little, and yet I am not given to tears. But this continuous agitation to which I am subjected, this terrible rivalry with my dearest friend, the spiritual conflicts between my conscience and my duty, between my unfortunate love and my shattered friendship, is nothing short of martyrdom. During my solitary walk I suddenly encountered Madame de Louvercy, and as I hastily wiped away my tears, Madame de Louvercy, who had her handkerchief in her hand, appeared to me to do the same, but she did not recover herself so quickly as I did.

"You have surprised me," she said. "I am in very low spirits to-day."

"Is M. Roger not quite so well?" I asked.

"Physically he is much the same, but it is his moral condition which terrifies me. For the last few days, since he has consented to mix with us, I have been in hopes that he was getting better, but I am afraid that my hopes are groundless. I am even fearful that this very fact of going into society a little makes him feel his shortcomings more than ever, and his regret and humiliation result in anger. You perhaps, who do not see these things, cannot understand them, but I see it every day, and his displays of passion are something terrible to me as his mother and as a Christian. Ah! my dear child," she added, "he does not believe in Providence, and avoids church as if he were a leper. I believe if he were only to pray he would be pacified, if not consoled, but he will not do it. I know he loves me, and yet I have never been able to persuade him to go down upon his knees."

The poor lady gave free vent to her tears, and as we looked sadly upon each other we found a species of consolation in the sympathy of our sorrowful hearts.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CONVERSATION—A WILD DRIVE.—THE LAST STRAW!

1st August.

THIS has been an important day in my life.

As there has been somewhat less animation in the château lately we did not have our walk this afternoon. We either kept our rooms or remained downstairs in the sitting-room.

When I had scribbled the above sentences it came into my head to go into the quiet part of the park where I had met Madame de Louvercy, and to resume the reverie which she had interrupted. Just as I entered it I heard footsteps behind me, and turning round I met Captain Eblis.

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle," he said, "but will you allow me a few minutes' conversation with you?"

My heart beat fast. I felt that the moment had come at last, and that my fate would now be settled once and for ever.

I replied as gaily as I could, though I felt my effort was a failure, that I should be happy to hear what he had to say.

He appeared to be greatly moved himself, and for a few moments walked at my side without speaking. Then he resumed—

"Mademoiselle, my boldness may appear to you excessive, but at any rate it will prove to you the deep and respectful feelings with which you inspire me, since I wish you to decide the happiness or unhappiness of my life. You, better than any one else in the world, are in a position to judge Mademoiselle Cécile de Stèle. You have been friends from infancy and school companions, I believe?"

I replied in the affirmative.

"You are, therefore, in the best position to judge of her character and disposition. Before making her an offer of my hand and devoting my life to her, may I ask what you think of her?"

"Everything that is good."

"I trust that you will understand, mademoiselle, that it is not commonplace curiosity that dictates these questions, and I trust there may be nothing general in your answers. Mademoiselle de Stèle is a very attractive young lady, very graceful and *spirituelle*, but somewhat peculiar. She astonishes me, and I may say frightens me a little occasionally, so for that reason I ask you, who are probably acquainted with all the hidden corners of her character, what is there to hope or to fear?"

"Cécile," I replied, "has never known a mother's care. She has been brought up entirely by her father, and being an only child has been spoiled. That is the explanation of her caprices and changeable humour which has so struck you. But her disposition is excellent; she is naturally the most tender, the most true and devoted of friends. She will be the tenderest, the truest, and most devoted of wives, provided that—there is a condition—she is properly guided, and that she loves her guide."

"I must beg a thousand pardons," he continued, "but do you think it possible that she can love a man

like myself, whose character is so very different from her own, whose serious and almost stern bent of mind is in such strong contrast to her light-heartedness, apparently at least?—You do not answer."

"It is because I am seeking for the proper terms to reply; my thoughts are clear enough on the subject. Well, then, monsieur, I believe that if there is a man who can arouse her affection, reform her little faults, and develop her good qualities even more—in fact, who can make her a faithful, happy, and trusting woman—it is yourself."

He bowed profoundly. Then, after a pause, he said—

"You love her dearly, do you not?"

"Very dearly."

"That speaks volumes for her. I thank you, mademoiselle. I will treat what you have told me as absolutely confidential."

We had been approaching the château as we talked, but now he retraced his steps after once again thanking me, and lifting his hat he disappeared quickly from my view.

As soon as he was out of sight I sank down upon one of the benches, for pride only had sustained me during the interview, and I felt as if the ground was giving way under my feet.

It was all over. In those few moments my whole life was shattered, my heart had received its death-blow.

But how is it possible that a man of honour or of taste can have behaved so? By what secret inspiration, by what refinement of cruelty, can he have been influenced? That is what I cannot understand.

Is it possible that he is conscious of the horrible torture that he inflicts upon me? I do not know. It has come to pass. I can say no more.

As soon as I understood the drift of his speech I had but one idea, and that was to preserve my self-respect in his eyes and in my own by rejecting the feeling of jealousy which prompted me to calumniate Cécile. Perhaps this determination had been carried too far, and had impelled me to say more than I thought and more than the actual truth. But it was better to exaggerate on that side than on the other.

However, the day's trials had not come to an end for me yet. As soon as I recovered myself I continued my walk to try to calm my agitation. I went straight on, not knowing whither I went. I was crossing one of the principal avenues of the park when the sound of carriage-wheels made me turn round. It was M. Roger in his dogcart. He was alone, for notwithstanding his mother's solicitations he refused to take a servant with him, as he had habitually refused any assistance which was not absolutely necessary.

He was driving at a great rate, as usual, and it was with some difficulty that he pulled up his horse when he saw me. As it was, he only stopped within two paces from me.

"Would you like to take a drive, mademoiselle?" he said, with his usual bitter and ironical smile.

I thanked him, but declined.

"Are you afraid of my horse or of me?"

"Neither of one nor the other," I replied.

"Well, then, in that case would you give me the pleasure of your society?"

"I don't think it would be quite proper—would it?"

"Oh, proper!" he repeated, with a toss of his head. "Unfortunately everything is proper with me. Besides, we shall not go outside of our own grounds. Will you not come? I suppose I make you shudder to look at me?"

I saw that his paleness and the sad expression of his face were increasing. I felt pity for him; and, besides, some little diversion from my thoughts would be beneficial. What could it matter now? It was all the same to me.

"If you will only drive through the park I shall like to go with you very much."

I then got into the dogcart, but not until after I had made two attempts, for the horse was very fresh, and would not stand still. Indeed, M. de Louvercy had some trouble to control it with his single hand.

As soon as I was seated we started off at a tremendous pace.

When we had gone some little distance M. de Louvercy said laughingly—

"You have mistaken your vocation, mademoiselle."

"How do you mean?"

"You were born to be a Sister of Charity. There was one at the hospital at Orleans where I was who was something like you. The likeness struck me directly I saw you. She was not so good-looking as you, though. Are you of West Indian extraction?"

"No, I am a Parisian. And this sister took great care of you, I suppose?"

"Yes, a great deal too much," he replied, with a sigh.

"Why too much?"

"What was the use of preserving a life which is only a burthen to the possessor and to every one else?"

"I hope you won't mind my telling you that you are very ungrateful to God. You have been cruelly wounded, no doubt, but are you not too insensible to the many consolations which are left to you, which are not enjoyed by many other unfortunate people?"

"What consolations, may I ask?"

"First of all your mother. Look at her unceasing tenderness and care for you; then look at the devoted friendship you enjoy—as rare as it is devoted; your power to study; the leisure you have to pursue your reading; the enjoyment it gives, the fame it promises."

"Yes," he replied bitterly, "all that only just keeps one from going out of one's mind, that's all, and there are times when I think I shall go mad, or that I am actually a lunatic."

He drove on in silence for some moments, jerking the reins mechanically, and worrying the horse, which did not need any further excitement. He did not apparently perceive that the animal was getting out of temper and gaining the upper hand.

M. de Louvercy continued—

"Have you seen Eblis this morning?"

"Yes, he had just left me when you drove up."

"Ah! he is a fine fellow, is he not?"

I replied by a simple movement of the head. He was looking at me fixedly.

"You are very pale, mademoiselle. I noticed it when I met you. Is anything the matter?"

"No."

There was a malicious smile on his face, and, as if he did it on purpose, he jerked the reins so violently that the horse started off. It was running away! We should inevitably be upset, and perhaps killed against the park gates. We very narrowly escaped this danger, and, turning swiftly to the right, the animal dashed down the high road, and, as I was aware, in the direction of the river, the banks of which in this direction are very steep and broken.

M. de Louvercy did all he could to soothe his horse, but could not succeed. We continued to rush along like the wind; trees and other objects appeared to fly past, and I began to feel giddy. We were almost at

the end of the road, and could perceive the sun shining upon the river, when M. de Louvercy turned to me and said coldly, with the scowling look that he assumes when in a bad temper—

"Mademoiselle, are you very anxious to live?"

In truth I did not much care just then. I merely elevated my eyebrows in reply.

"Does not matter?" he said; "that is a pity!"

I do not know whether or not he was possessed of some secret influence over his runaway steed, and had kept it in reserve till that moment; but, however that may have been, he by a few caressing words and a turn of the wrist brought the animal under control, and we were able to turn into another road leading away from the river.

M. de Louvercy, whose coolness I had been admiring —for we had really been in great danger—now said quietly—

"It is easy enough to understand that I do not much care to live, but that you should be indifferent to existence is a mystery."

"It is a mystery," I replied with an assenting smile.

"Disappointed in love, eh?" he continued with grim irony.

Then after a pause he continued—

"So pretty, and yet despised—that is very curious."

"Sir," I returned hotly, "your misfortunes give you great privileges, no doubt, but I do not think they entitle you to insult a lady."

"Have I not told you that I am an idiot?"

"I can see that," I replied; "but I am glad you reminded me of it."

He did not speak for some time after this, but sat biting his lips till the blood came. Then he said in a voice trembling with emotion—

"Mademoiselle, I am quite unworthy of the honour

you have done me. I can see that, and I humbly beg your pardon."

"Very well, sir," I replied; "shall we return now?"

We were then some distance from home, for I could perceive the little church of Louvercy not far off amongst the trees.

"Let us go back," he repeated mournfully, "but let us not return in anger and as enemies. Listen, mademoiselle: is there anything in the world that a poor miserable creature like me can do to show his profound respect for you, and to wipe out the recollection of his ungentlemanlike speech?"

An idea suddenly occurred to me. I remembered that Madame de Louvercy had that morning been lamenting the impiety of her son. I could see the church close by.

"Yes," I replied, "there is something you may do at once, and prove your words, and even gain my esteem. Do you see the church yonder? Come there with me and say your prayers."

He frowned, and then in a softened voice said—

"My mother has been talking to you?"

"Yes."

"Do *you* wish me to go?"

"Yes."

"Let us go, then."

In a few minutes we reached the inclosure. The curate's servant, who was surprised to see M. de Louvercy, came out to hold the horse. We then alighted, and, passing through the cemetery, entered the church, a proceeding which astonished the servant still more.

The church is very simple, and consists of one white and undecorated nave. I preceded M. de Louvercy, whose crutch rang along the aisle. We reached the chairs usually occupied by Madame de Louvercy's

family. I indicated a particular seat, and whispered to my companion—

"That is your mother's *prie-dieu.*"

I assisted him to kneel down, and he made no resistance. He bent his head upon his hand, and I knelt beside him. I prayed most earnestly for him and for myself, and I then heard sobs.

When we arose I perceived that his face was wet with tears.

"Look," he said; "see what you have made a soldier do!"

"But you are forgiven now," I replied, as I held out my hand to him.

We soon entered the dogcart again, and drove rapidly but steadily homewards. His emotion had passed away, and he became almost cheerful, and even spoke to the peasants whom we met on the way, inquired about their affairs, and told me all their history. I knew before this that he was very popular in the district, for his misanthropy did not prevent him doing good to his poorer neighbours.

We were driving through the park, when at a turn of the road we perceived three people walking slowly in front of us. These were Madame de Louvercy, Captain Eblis, and Cécile. They appeared greatly surprised to see me with M. Roger.

"Mother," he cried, laughing, "I thought I was going to run away with Mademoiselle d'Erra, but she ran away with me, and do you know where she took me to? No, you will never guess. Well, then, I will let her tell you herself."

I alighted, and taking Madame de Louvercy apart, I whispered—

"I took him to the church: he has been praying."

She uttered a cry of joy, and clasped me rapturously in her arms.

"Oh! my darling, darling girl!" she exclaimed, and then after a pause and deep sigh she continued—

"This is not the only piece of good news I have heard to-day. Do you know that Cécile?"—and she pointed towards her as she stood beside Captain Eblis.

"Yes, I know," I replied.

"Who would ever have thought that she would have chosen so wisely, and that he—but God works for the best."

Cécile now came up, and taking my arm, said to her aunt—

"Will you let her come with me for a little time?"

So Madame de Louvercy and Captain Eblis went on to join M. Roger, who was walking his horse gently homewards. Cécile took my arm and led me by a winding path to a retired part of the park which is called the Hermitage. The story goes that this place was formerly the habitation of a hermit, and they think that some traces can be discovered of his dwelling, but the only portion that remains intact is a very old and narrow archway, within which a spring bubbles up. This is the source of the little stream which traverses the wood. There is a large space of ground which might formerly have been a garden, and in which, to this day, are many trees. It is a singularly wild and pleasant spot, very solitary, but very charming—one of those picturesque places which remind one of the representations of antique fountains, surrounded by joyous nymphs and shepherds.

Cécile led the way in silence, and then looking at me with a restless expression in her eyes, she threw her arms round me and burst into tears.

"Ah!" she cried, "I have taken him from you, I have taken him from you!"

My tears mingled with hers, but I kissed her and said—

"What nonsense! What can you be thinking of? Don't worry yourself about such an idea."

"You have been so good to me," she continued, still weeping, "so generous—he has told me so. You are far more worthy of him than I, but you do not love him very much. Oh, tell me if you do!"

"Nonsense, nonsense, my darling—make yourself quite easy—it is merely a feeling of friendship."

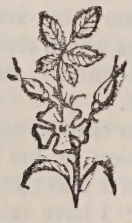
"As for me, I adore him. Listen," she continued. "It is here in this lonely spot that he told me he loved me, and asked me to be his wife. I should like to be buried here. Do you think that could be managed?"

"I am sure I cannot say, dear; you say very absurd things, you know."

"I believe I am rather silly, but do you think he will be happy with me? I do so wish that he may be."

"He will be happy, dearest."

I need not continue. I was not spared a single pang. I can write no more. What can I do now? I will wait till to-morrow, and will tell my grandmother everything.



CHAPTER XIV.

TORTURE! *2nd August.*

MY grandmother, in common with the whole house, was soon made acquainted with the news of Cécile's engagement. Although very much annoyed, and even angry, she received the intelligence calmly, and in a way which set me an example. She merely said as she left me on the stairs—

"That young man must have a very curious taste, my dear."

She came into my room this morning just as I was waking from a very troubled sleep. Having kissed me warmly, she said—

"My dearest child, Mesdames de Sauves and de Chagres have just informed me that they are going away to-day with their brothers. I must say I think their conduct ridiculous. It is tantamount to an expression of their disappointment. It is ridiculous, and in bad taste. We have a little more pride than that, I hope, my dear."

I quite agree with her.

"We know how to put up with disappointment, and although it may be very trying we will remain here for a little time longer—at least, that is my advice. Can you bear it?"

"I will school myself to it," I replied.

"Besides, my dearest child, to leave now, under the circumstances, would not be reasonable or worthy of us. It is very much better to try and look things in the face, if I may use the expression. Do you not think so?"

"I do not know yet."

"Well, you will see. If it is too trying for you we will go away. I beg your pardon, my dear, if I seem to ride roughshod over your grief instead of being more tender with you, but it is the wisest plan. We ought never to nurse our sorrows. Give me a kiss, darling, and be sure I love you very dearly."

She went away into her own apartment that I should not see her cry, I verily believe.

I had often heard worldly people turn the constancy of love into ridicule, particularly in my own sex, which I must now beg leave to doubt, or at any rate to record an exception. It appears impossible to me that my heart should ever again, even in the most distant future, open to any sentiment which could supersede that which it has already admitted. Right or wrong, I am convinced that I should always love the man whom I have loved once with all my heart, with all the power and passion of my life. I cannot even picture to myself the possibility that with such feelings I ever could be united to another. Unless, therefore, some great change takes place in me—a change which I neither desire nor expect—I shall never marry. As long as my grandmother is spared to me I will live with her and for her. If I survive her I will return to the convent in which my youth was passed, and never appear in the world again. I feel that then I shall not be unhappy. No doubt I shall carry about with me sad memories, but I shall find some consolation. Apart from the poetic surround-

ings of the cloister and the sweet familiarity of Divine things, I shall there find in my humble vocation of instructress the shadow of maternal devotion of which I shall never know the reality. What I have formerly done for Cécile I will now do for others, and they will be my children.

In this manner having prepared for the future, I will for the present conform to my grandmother's desires; her firmness is in accord with my own wishes. I should blush to confess a humiliating disappointment by an abrupt departure. That I shall suffer much I do not doubt, but I believe that during the last four-and-twenty hours I have endured all that it is possible for me to suffer.

* * * * * *

8th August.

My grandmother has had a lengthy interview with Madame de Louvercy, the object of which I have not been able to discover, but which appears to have modified her arrangements. Instead of leaving, as we intended, after a lapse of some days, we are to go to-morrow. She came and told me this, saying that we had done enough for dignity. My grandmother looked very grave, and Madame de Louvercy, as I met her leaving my grandmother's apartments, appeared greatly disturbed.

However, nothing has passed which in any way interferes with their regard for each other, that is evident. They are as affectionate as ever, but a sadness has fallen upon them. I have relinquished all hope of fathoming the mystery, which disturbs me very little.

The important question for me is that we are going away. I confess I overrated my strength. I cannot endure this torture longer. The departure of the Valnesse party naturally has thrown me more into the

society of the *fiancés*, and I must be a silent witness of their love-making and of their happiness, a smiling yet despairing witness of their love.

Jealousy is a terribly complicated disease. It not only brings acute suffering with it, but it degrades the sufferer. One is not only tortured but humiliated. The wound is not clean nor healthy. Pride festers it, envy and hatred mortify within it. Every passionate heart, I suppose, at some time or other, is capable of the most unworthy sentiments; the merit is not in being incapable of such feelings, but in hating and overcoming them. This is what I am endeavouring, by God's assistance, to accomplish. But I am very glad we are going away!

I have promised Cécile to come back for the wedding if she is married here, but I think the ceremony ought to take place in Paris, and I should much prefer that myself.

M. de Louvercy did not join us at breakfast this morning. He is apparently suffering a great deal. I have noticed this for some days indeed, that he has been very languid, and more ailing than formerly.

I am sorry to have to leave without bidding him good-bye. I shall in all probability never see him again, for he never leaves Louvercy, and I sincerely hope I may never see it again.

Poor M. Roger! I shall always cherish a kindly recollection of him for what he did for me.

CHAPTER XV.

A NIGHT SURPRISE.

9th August.

OH, what a night it has been!

The necessity for superintending our packing kept me up till one o'clock this morning. I had just dismissed my maid, and was beginning to undress, when I thought I heard a door opposite mine opened very cautiously, then the sound of light footsteps, then the creaking of the stairs as some one descended carefully. Surprised, and agitated by I do not know what vague fear, I opened my door very gently, and perceived a feeble gleam of light at the bottom of the staircase. At the same time I could hear the murmur of suppressed voices, and, as it seemed, mingled with groans. I leaned over the banisters and saw Madame de Louvercy on the landing, candle in hand, listening intently at the door of her son's apartment. Suddenly she opened the door with the greatest caution and glided into the room.

Panting and terrified, I remained in the same position for a few moments, when a piercing cry arose through the silence of the night. I hurried downstairs, and in a second was standing at the door by which Madame de Louvercy had entered. It led into a sort of study, which

in its turn opened into M. Roger's room. This study was plunged in darkness, but a few rays of light found their way through the chinks of the door of the farther room. I bent down and listened. Madame de Louvercy was in the room. I could hear her sobbing loudly, and her voice rose at intervals in despairing and imploring accents. Nobody replied to her. I was seized with a mortal terror; I thought something dreadful had happened. I even advanced some paces into the study, and, without thinking what I was about, lifted a corner of the curtain which divided the apartments.

Opposite to me I saw M. Roger de Louvercy seated by the table, motionless and as pale as a ghost. He was regarding with lack-lustre and fixed eyes his unhappy mother who knelt before him, her hands clasped tightly in nervous supplication. I noticed a sealed packet upon the table, and close to it one of those oblong cases which I knew must contain pistols.

At last M. Roger muttered angrily—

"Jean would have done better to have held his tongue" (Jean was the old soldier, his confidential servant).

"I beseech you," sobbed his distracted mother—"I implore you! Am I nothing—am I nothing—to you? Oh, mon Dieu!"

He still hesitated, then I saw him curb his passion, and taking his mother's head tenderly between his hands he bent down and kissed her forehead.

"Forgive me," he said. "The hour of my folly has passed—ay, for ever! I promise you!"

"Will you promise me that? You will *really* promise, my darling, will you not?"

"Yes, yes; only leave me, I beg of you. But I must never see her again—is it not so?"

"Yes, that is understood; you know she leaves to-morrow—this very morning!"

"And mind, she is never to know a word about all this!"

"No, never!"

"Well, then, mother dear, you may go and sleep in peace. Once more your forgiveness. Go in peace; you have my word of honour. I will swear it! You may take away those pistols if you wish."

While they embraced each other fondly I hastened away and reached my chamber. I spent the rest of the night in strange surmises.

As soon as it was light I went into my grandmother's room and had a long conversation with her. She was then going to tell me why Madame de Louvercy had hastened our departure, but it was useless. I knew the reason in a moment!

I will now try to sleep a little, and then resume my narrative.

CHAPTER XVI.

A RESOLVE.

The same day.

THE resolution I have come to has been very warmly contested by my grandmother.

"My dearest girl," she said, "you know quite well that I am no enemy to a little romance in life, but this idea of yours is really carrying the thing too far. At your age, with your figure, education, fortune, and general attainments, to marry an invalid is no doubt very generous, very poetical and self-sacrificing, but, frankly, it is overstepping all prudence. Now, my dear child, if you had come to this determination under ordinary circumstances, in cold blood so to speak, and with your heart and feelings fresh and all your own—well and good; but this is not the case. You have only just experienced a disappointment—and what that young gentleman can be thinking of I don't know—however, my darling, you are just now in the condition of mind to lead you to a reckless conclusion. It is very necessary that you should guard against any approach to enthusiasm, which may only be the result of a feeling of desperation. At least wait—wait for a few months, think over this fancy of yours; if you still remain of the same mind, well, then, we will see about it. But I really should not be doing my duty by

you if I permitted you, in your present state of mind, and with the recollection of the tragic scene of last night fresh in your memory, to engage yourself as you suggest."

Such were the objections urged by my grandmother, and I combated them with all the eloquence at my command.

No doubt I am a little romantic, but then had she never fostered such a disposition in me? Had it not always recommended itself to me as the true secret of happiness in marriage? No doubt my heart is deeply wounded, but is it not therefore all the more necessary that it should be sustained by the performance of a duty and by a generous devotion of myself? Ought it not to find its consolation only in promoting the happiness of others, and thus endeavour to forget its own lost happiness?

I did not hide from my grandmother my intention to enter a convent if ever I should be left alone in the world. In that case, too, I should make a sacrifice, and had not the opportunity which now presented itself a more elevated, a more pious, less selfish character, than the simple renunciation of the world and the commonplace sacrifices expected of a teacher? As to her suggestion that I should wait, that would be perhaps to run the risk of losing all the merit and all the benefit of my course of action. Who knows whether in the interval the unfortunate young man might not yield to despair, as he had already done, and from which his mother might not be able to rescue him again as she had lately done? One thing is very certain, and that is, by waiting I should lose the best part of my recompense—namely, the joy of witnessing the happiness of mother and son, and appearing to them as an angel of light, delivering them from the darkness of spirit which at present enshrouded them. That one act of my life would cast upon the past, the present, and the future a halo of infinite happiness and peace.

My dear old grandmother wept bitterly, and was anxious to yield to me if possible.

"Alas! my dearest child," she said, "people will say that we are two fools."

"There are some follies which God will bless," I replied.

"Well, let it be as you wish; but now there is another difficulty which I had not foreseen."

"What can that be?"

"How are we to explain this to Madame de Louvercy and her son? I must do the poor mother the justice to say that when she confided to me her son's unfortunate passion she did not for one moment entertain the supposition—certainly a most unlikely one—of a marriage between you. The young man evidently does not think such a thing possible, which speaks volumes for his good sense. Now what is to be done? Must we go and offer ourselves to them? throw ourselves into their arms, so to speak? It is impossible, my dear; altogether out of the question."

"But, grandmother, are you quite sure that they will not refuse?"

"Ah! that is the last straw. It is a very, very delicate question."

"Will you allow me to take my own way in the matter?"

"Oh, my gracious! Why not? One may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. Since we are plunged neck deep in irregularities one more or less will not matter. But I suppose, at least, that you will address yourself to his mother?"

"Of course," I replied.

* * * * * *

That is the reason why I have requested Madame de Louvercy to grant me an interview. In a few moments I shall be with her.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE OFFERED HEART.

The same day.

MADAME DE LOUVERCY was with her son when my message was brought to her. She immediately came upstairs to my room. Her face—one of the most noble countenances that I know—was still very pale in consequence of what she had gone through the previous night. She met me with a smile, however, but with an absent air which denoted her thoughts were far from anticipating the surprise in store for her.

"My dear child," she said, "you wish to bid me good-bye. You are very kind. I myself am best pleased to make my adieux in private, for I can more easily tell you how much I regret your departure, and how much I thank you for having been so kind and so sympathetic to us all."

She took my hands in hers as she spoke. She saw that I looked very troubled, and she felt that I was trembling. Her countenance changed all at once, and her eyes sought mine with an expression of astonishment and a vague suspicion of something more to come.

"Madame," I said hesitatingly, "I have an apology to make to you. I was very indiscreet last night——"

She looked at me more intently than before.

"I heard you go downstairs. Then I heard your cries. I was afraid that you required assistance. I went downstairs——"

"You know all?" she exclaimed, trembling violently in her turn.

"Yes, I know all. I am deeply touched by the affection with which your son regards me. I deeply sympathise with his misfortunes, and, madame"—here I approached her very gently—"will you have me for your daughter?"

She seemed completely overcome. Her eyes dilated, she clasped my hands firmly in her own, her lips moved, but no sound passed them.

At length she murmured, as if in a dream, "No, it is not possible!"

"Will you have me for your daughter?" I repeated with a smile.

"Ah!"

What a cry that was! the glad outpouring of a mother's heart.

I cannot tell exactly what passed during the next few minutes. I felt half-fainting, and I think she was also greatly overcome. She embraced me and addressed me by the most loving names, praying and weeping together, thanking God and me together for the happiness He had bestowed upon her.

As soon as she had recovered herself a little she said anxiously—

"But what will your grandmother say to all this?"

"She consents."

"Indeed. Let us go to her."

She hurried me away to my grandmother's room. After the first transports were over my grandmother wisely suggested that before we proceeded any farther in the matter it would be well to ascertain the intentions of M. de Louvercy.

"Oh!" exclaimed his mother, "Heaven grant that my poor son does not die of joy! but I must not keep this happy news from him any longer."

She caught sight of herself in the glass—her beautiful white hair all dishevelled and in disorder.

"What a figure I am!" she said. "He will think me mad."

She then arranged her headdress and walked towards the door with the light and springy step of youth; in fact, she looked ten years younger than she had lately done. She stopped in the doorway, and, turning round, said—

"He will not believe me—I am sure he won't."

She looked at me timidly. I confess I was very anxious to accompany her.

My grandmother, carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, pushed me by the shoulders, and said—

"Go, my dear, you may as well finish this chapter of unconventionalities—go along."

Madame de Louvercy placed my arm in hers, and led me out of the room almost at a run.

As we were descending the stairs she said—

"What a contrast this to the terrors of last night!"

She opened the door of her son's apartments and requested me to remain in the study for a moment. She then lifted the curtain and passed into the inner room.

The moment she left me I was struck by the strangeness and the apparent boldness of my conduct. I had need to recall all my resolution to justify the step I had taken—the peculiar circumstances of the case and the necessity for reserve upon M. Roger's part—and I was obliged to remind myself that ordinary rules must be in this case put aside from between us. But I was none the less waiting at his door like an Eastern slave, and this appeared to me extremely disagreeable, to say the

least of it. This feeling of discomfort increased in proportion as my solitude was prolonged and I had time for reflection, which I had not counted upon. I had fancied that the meeting with M. de Louvercy would be as hurried and unexpected as that with his mother, and that all explanation would be given and received in a moment; but, instead of that, minutes passed and I could still hear the murmur of voices through the curtain, and explanations and discussions going on as on any ordinary topic. My heart stood still; I felt faint, but just at that moment Madame de Louvercy appeared, not looking sad indeed, but nevertheless serious and somewhat disturbed.

"Will you come in, my dear?" she said softly.

I entered the room.

M. de Louvercy was standing up, resting his wounded knee upon a chair. The habitual troubled and sarcastic expression of his face had given way to a grave and almost solemn look. His eyes appeared to me to be filled with tears. Looking at me steadfastly and speaking very slowly, as if mastering his emotion, he said—

"Mademoiselle, my mother has told me of that truly angelic feeling which has brought you here, and if I were not the invalid I am I would cast myself at your feet. I cannot accept your sacrifice nevertheless, but the thought of your having come will be the consolation and charm of my life. My most profound gratitude, my most tender admiration, will always be yours, and may God bless you wherever you may be! I beg of you, mademoiselle, not to prolong this trial, which is more than I can bear. Leave me while I am yet firm in the resolution which honour commands me to make, and for which you will, perhaps, esteem me more highly. Once more a thousand thanks, and adieu!"

He bowed very deeply. His mother stood by, weeping silently.

I advanced a few paces and frankly extended my hand. He took it and pressed it forcibly.

"O my God!" he murmured.

Then looking at me affectionately, he said—

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, I do not know what to say; my heart is so full—my spirit is so troubled, you have transported me so quickly from earth to heaven; but at least let me prove to you that I have been sincere—that I fear to take advantage of such generosity as yours. I beg that you will take some time to reflect. In a few months—in a year perhaps—if you still think you can perform such a noble act of devotion, then my happiness will be complete, but till then I hope you will consider yourself absolutely free, and under no obligation whatever in consequence of your never-to-be-forgotten kindness."

As he still held my hand I had no need to give it to him to ratify the contract with which Madame de Louvercy appeared quite satisfied, hoping perhaps, and perhaps with reason, that it would share the fate of many other modern treaties.

As for me, I replied simply—

"As you please, monsieur, but I shall not change. *Au revoir*. We shall see you again presently, for I suppose you do not wish us to go away to-day. Perhaps you will allow us to remain a day or two longer?"

He bowed and smiled, and kissed my hand. His mother and I then left the room.

My grandmother, on hearing the result of our meeting, declared that M. Roger's conduct was perfectly straightforward and honourable. I thought so too, and, after having been very much shocked and mortified at the somewhat cool manner in which he had received us and spoken to me, I should have regretted very much if he had acted otherwise. I was thankful for his hesitation and his scruples, which meant more than he

actually expressed. Yes, no doubt he hesitated to take advantage of my romantic enthusiasm of which I might repent later, but he also feared to accept the gift of a wounded heart which is not, and perhaps never will be, healed, for it is certain that he has some suspicion of my regard for Captain Eblis. He cannot, of course, ask me for an explanation, but, however delicate the subject may be, I will explain it to him some day, and as he is so straightforward he will be content with the love I can give him. Yes, it is only a wounded and a bleeding heart that I can offer him, but it is at least a devoted and faithful one.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DEVOTED LIFE. *August.*

I THINK I have acted wisely. However, I must not deceive myself. I am far from being happy—I never shall be really happy. I have had a glimpse of too perfect happiness ever to be consoled for its loss. But at length the importunity of this thought has ceased. I have an aim in life, a future before me. I have a duty to perform which will fill up the void in my life, which will occupy me, and to which I will be faithful. It is an attractive task to release a soul from despair, and to bring it peace, happiness, and submission to the will of God. These are the cares to which I will consecrate my life, with an interest which I believe will increase day by day, like the affection of a mother for her sick child, and which I hope will leave him who is the object of it nothing to regret.

At present he sees and understands how much I can give him, and how sincerely I give it. I have told him something of the past; he guesses the rest, and appears contented. As I expected, our agreement did not hold for any length of time. It is true that he insisted upon my taking time to consider. I did not

object, but I remain here, and he does not complain. I believe that we shall be married in a few weeks.

It was necessary to confide the great secret to Cécile and her *fiancé*. Whatever Captain Eblis thought, he only said—

"You have acted in a manner worthy of yourself."

As for Cécile, she was at first completely taken aback, and then she went into a sort of rapture of mingled joy and affection which she has not yet got over. We shall be cousins—half-sisters; this is her dream. She fancies that this marriage will knit our intimacy still closer—that our lives will, so to speak, become commingled. But in this respect she is mistaken. She will still be my dearest friend, but it is most likely that for some time at least we shall live farther apart than ever. The despondency under which M. de Louvercy laboured had until lately prevented him from yielding to the advice of his physicians, who recommended him to remain in the South of Europe by the seaside. Now he wishes to live. I have already talked to him about an establishment at Nice for the winter, and I saw that he was pleased, for more than one reason perhaps.

And here I will close my diary—never, I hope, to resume it. I think that when a woman is married she ought to have no other confidant than her husband. So farewell, romantic and passionate Charlotte.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

MARRIED LIFE. 1878.

FIVE years have passed. I am again impelled to take up my journal, and under very extra ordinary circumstances. I have experienced a terrible trial, and at no time has it been more necessary for me to endeavour to arrange my thoughts.

I must first recall the circumstances which have led up to the present condition of things, and endeavour to extract the consolation from them of which I am in need. I am beginning to recognise the fact that these pages may some day be read by other eyes than my own, and for this reason, if for no other, I do not wish to leave any part of my record in obscurity.

I was married at the same time as Cécile, as I have already stated, in the pretty little church at Louvercy. Captain and Mrs. Eblis left for Italy, where they intended to spend some months. Five or six weeks afterwards my husband and I, accompanied by my mother-in-law, went down to Nice.

The state of my husband's health was the cause of the only anxiety that fell upon me during the four years

which we have spent in this lovely place. I cannot truthfully declare that my heart was entirely without regret—that I never had any melancholy moments—but I can at any rate state that my (foolish) marriage had been blessed as much as I had any right to expect. There was no question of martyrdom in my life, nevertheless such a task as I had undertaken was not without its trials; there was not a day scarcely that I had not my work to accomplish, and to endeavour to disinter the true light from the ruins of that body in which it had remained buried for so many years. My tears shed in my first days of disappointment began, as time went on, to give way to tears of happiness as I perceived that my efforts were more successful. At last a day arrived on which I had only to raise my finger smilingly to see my husband check his hitherto ungovernable fits of passion.

But I must also in candour admit that this apparent miracle was not due to me alone, but the change dated from the birth of my little girl.

I was still expecting the advent of my little one when Cécile and her husband came to pass a short time with us on their return from Rome. I had been secretly dreading the arrival of M. Eblis, but other cares had by this time made me indifferent to his presence, or at least I fancied I was.

But when he appeared I found him so ceremonious, so cold, that I was tormented by the notion that he cherished some feeling of resentment against me. Perhaps he was disappointed in Cécile, and was angry with me for having portrayed her in too flattering colours. His behaviour towards his wife surprised me. He did not appear in the least charmed by her or under her influence. Always very polite, there was nevertheless in his manner a dry irony which was puzzling. He frequently appeared bored by the re-

citals of their journeyings in which she indulged; he confused names of places and people, and mixed up dates painfully. But my husband, to whom I had hinted my suspicions, assured me that Captain Eblis was more than ever attached to his wife; that he was, perhaps, not altogether pleased to notice that she was so openly admired and that she so evidently appreciated this admiration, but that was all. I thought no more about the matter. Besides, I was too happy and too much engaged to trouble myself about other people's business.

We had made up our minds to leave Nice at the beginning of summer and return to Louvercy, for my husband dislikes the idea of living in Paris. But the doctors were fearful of the effect of the damp climate of Normandy, and on their advice we decided to remain in the South of Europe until his health had improved.

The two years following were full of happiness for me. My dear grandmother often came to see us, my mother-in-law was most affectionate; and, more than all else, I had my little daughter with me, and her arrival, as I have already hinted, had quite reconciled my husband and me.

He was very much occupied with his literary work, in which I assisted him as far as possible as amanuensis, and in arranging the documents which Captain Eblis had sent us, making extracts, and copying in my very best hand the almost illegible writing he had forwarded.

It was no longer surprising that Captain Eblis had aroused such a feeling of devoted friendship in my husband. I was ready to confess as much when I knew only his defects. But since he had begun to regard himself as a man restored to society, and no longer condemned to a solitary existence, without family ties and hopes for the future, his good qualities

had asserted themselves. He was as cheerful as possible, and I certainly would never have given him credit for cheerfulness at our first meeting. It was very consoling for me to reflect that my influence had had something to do with this pleasant change. But what touched me most of all was the implicit confidence reposed in me. I had thought when I married that all society would be, to a certain extent at any rate, tabooed; and I had made up my mind to renounce all gaiety, for it would not be becoming in me to seek amusements which my husband could not share.

But he was always extremely desirous that I should accompany his mother to any little parties in our neighbourhood, and although I very seldom availed myself of this permission, I occasionally received at home. I was naturally, as was perhaps to be expected, subjected to a good deal of attention from gentlemen. An infirm and ailing husband may serve to encourage these people—who knows? But I flatter myself that I kept this class of men at a respectful distance, and gave them to understand that I was not inclined to play at love-making. My husband, who was particularly clear-sighted, used to quiz me frequently, and used rather to pique himself upon Cæsar's wife being above suspicion, and he was indifferent accordingly. I could not quarrel with him, of course, but nevertheless his confidence appeared to me somewhat intrusive, so to speak, and became embarrassing, so much so that it led up to the greatest trouble of my whole life.

There is at Nice, as at all similar places, a mixture of society amongst which it is necessary to choose one's *clique*. I am naturally exclusive, and do not readily lend myself to the everyday associations of watering-place society. M. de Louvercy, like all men, is more tolerant than I am in such matters. He maintains that my drawing-room is a sheepfold in which only the very

steadiest sheep and the most irreproachable lambs are admitted: but that such an arrangement is rather "slow"—that there is a want of "life," and, above all, an exclusiveness which savours of the uncharitable. But I was quite unmoved by his arguments, and replied that my mission was not to regenerate society, and in any case that, as I had improved him so greatly, that was quite sufficient for my lifetime, and I had no desire to reform any one else.

After we had lived at Nice about two years the young Prince Viviane took up his residence in a house not far off. He brought with him a regular stud of horses and his wife, who they said was an English lady—and indeed she might have been if one can judge from the rainbow hues of her toilette! Although my grandmother and the dowager princess were acquainted, I did not remember that I ever had met her son, who was not the steadiest of young princes. Even my husband, who had been at school with him, was not best pleased at his appearance amongst us. However, fate had so willed it that up to the present time we had not met.

One morning I was walking in our garden with my baby and the nurse. This garden was laid out in terraces one above the other, which were connected by flights of marble steps. The lowest of these terraces joined the high road, a dozen steps leading to it through a gate which was open all day. We were leaning over the palisade watching the white sails reflected in the clear blue sea when the sound of horses' hoofs attracted our attention, and we perceived a gentleman and lady slowly riding along the road. She was rather gaudily dressed, and wore an enormous white feather in her riding-hat. She appeared to me to be extremely beautiful.

Just as the riders were passing beneath the railings my little girl extended her chubby arms and began to cry with all the strength of her infant lungs, so that the

nurse, who was an Italian, was obliged to sing some childish songs to quiet it. This concert made the gentleman look up, and, regarding me fixedly, he raised his hat and then pulled up, saying with a smile—

"What is the matter with the little lady, nurse?"

Very much surprised by this familiarity I drew back, at the same time forbidding the nurse to make any answer. But she did not understand my whispered injunctions, and calmly engaged in conversation with the gentleman on horseback.

"I really think," she said, "that baby wants the lady's white feather, sir."

"Give her the feather, Sarah," said the young man, turning to his companion.

She at once took the plume from her hat and tossed it towards the nurse, but the proverbial lightness of the missile held good in this instance, and it fell short. But the gentleman caught it flying, and again essayed to launch it over the terrace, but without greater success. At length he said—

"Well, I suppose I must take it to the little woman myself!"

At the same moment he urged his horse up the steps; it slipped upon the marble, but recovered itself, slipped down again, and slid about most alarmingly. I had heard all that passed, concealed as I was amongst the orange-trees, and I became very nervous, when suddenly I saw this rash rider before me like an equestrian statue advancing triumphantly along the broad walk of the terrace. He bowed to me again, but this time more respectfully, and bent down to place the feather in baby's hands. The child, I may add, had become quite quiet by the appearance of the stranger, who, again bowing to me, descended the staircase as he had come up—on horseback. When I returned home I related the adventure to my husband.

"That must have been Viviane," he said. "It was just like him to behave so."

And it was he, sure enough. That very evening he came to our house, and introduced himself as an old friend of my husband. He was a tall, fair man, with a somewhat bold expression, with good face, but with rather dissipated look. He was always laughing, and very amusing. My husband received him very cordially. I was more distant, and scarcely thanked him for the feather, not knowing, in truth, whether he intended his politeness for my child, the nurse, or myself.

This visit was the precursor of many others at short intervals. I could see that the young man's good spirits and nonsense amused my husband, but nevertheless I neither invited him nor repelled him. The prince was too much a man of the world not to perceive the coldness with which I treated him, and, notwithstanding his perfect self-possession, he at times appeared almost put out of countenance. My husband also noticed my manner, and was even annoyed by it.

"My dear girl," he said to me one day after the prince had left us, "Viviane is quite hurt. You have really a very icy manner with people. What has the poor man done to offend you?"

"Nothing, dear."

"No? But does he annoy you?—are his attentions disagreeable? He amuses me, I know, but if he troubles you I will be a little less amiable to him in future."

"I assure you that he is absolutely indifferent to me," I replied. "I have never met him out of our house, and you know that he is a model of propriety."

"Well, then, dear, allow me to say that it is you who —I mean you treat him rather rudely."

"But if I encourage him ever so little he will introduce the young person who is with him, and——"

"Oh! very well; it is no matter."

"Yes, that is all very well, but I have a great objection to any such informal proceedings. You know that I dislike to see even a chair out of place, and I cannot tolerate any suspicion of a want of etiquette, or *mésalliance*. I know how greatly grieved the poor princess was at her son's marriage, and besides——"

"Very well, my dear, but I cannot say I pity the 'poor princess' very much. She completely ruined him as a lad by her worse than foolish idolatry, and by endeavouring to persuade him that all creation had been made for him alone. I recollect very well when she purchased that wonderful goat-chaise for the child in the Champs Elysées because he wanted it. The result was that he did as he pleased, and ended by marrying a ballet-girl from Drury Lane. What could any one expect?"

"Yes, it is probably a very logical conclusion, but none the less displeasing for all that."

It was quite a week after this conversation ere the prince again called at our house. He came one morning and saw my husband alone. They remained closeted together for some time. M. de Louvercy gave me an account of the interview subsequently. It appeared that M. de Viviane excused himself for having "broken off" his visits, but the fact was, he said, that his presence did not seem to be agreeable to me. My husband, who was much struck by his serious tone and manner, took him at his word, and told him that it was scarcely to be expected that a lady so strictly brought up as I had been would put herself in the way to meet the young person who now bore his name, and so on.

"As a rule," he replied, "I do not trouble myself about what the world says, but I confess that Madame de Louvercy's coldness has affected me."

"It does not arise from any personal feeling, my

friend; it is merely a question of social intercourse and a not unnatural embarrassment."

They parted after this explanation; the prince was very thoughtful apparently.

Two days afterwards, as I came in from my walk, my husband told me that he had invited M. de Viviane to dinner for the following day.

I was very much astonished to hear this. He smiled at my looks, and continued—

"He has sent the young lady on a visit to her mother, and I thought that he deserved some little recompense."

I was satisfied, and when the prince arrived next day I shook hands with him more warmly than usual. From that time we became better friends, and he was at length admitted to our more intimate society.

But as if to compensate for the improved tone of his moral atmosphere he revenged himself by playing baccarat in the most extravagant manner, and one evening he told me that he had actually won thirty thousand francs.

"You are falling from Scylla into Charybdis, I am afraid," I replied.

His reply was to pull out a handful of notes from his pocket, and he said—

"This is for your poor 'pensioners.'"

"I will accept your gift upon one condition, and that is, you must promise me never to touch cards again."

"I promise," he said.

I was thus enabled to send thirty thousand francs to my grandmother for the benefit of her young apprentices. But I regret to add that although the prince kept his word in respect of the cards, he had other vices—indeed, on more than one occasion he appeared to me to have taken too much wine. There is nothing in the world of which I have a greater horror than a

tipsy man, and the prince, perceiving my disgust, set himself to reform, and by degrees he succeeded. These petty triumphs amused my husband greatly, but I confess I was not altogether easy in my mind as to the result.

It was about this time that Cécile and her husband arrived in Nice for the second time. I had always kept up a correspondence with her. Judging by her letters she was happy, although she appeared to me to seek all her pleasure in worldly amusements. I found her just as charming, and in no way sobered down by her marriage. She appeared to be somewhat afraid of her husband, and her manner struck me particularly as not easy in his presence. He was always affectionate, but there was a constraint in his manner towards her. I was very much surprised, and, indeed, terrified, when I perceived that my own heart had by no means forgotten him, and that he still exercised his old power over me. I could not even listen to his voice without experiencing a sadness impossible to analyse. He had not been in the neighbourhood four-and-twenty hours ere I sought to avoid him or to shorten his sojourn in Nice. He himself furnished the opportunity—a most ill-advised and indiscreet act on his part—which I have since been able to account for, but which at the time was quite incomprehensible.

I began to wonder whether my husband guessed my secret, or was he now beginning to feel the first symptoms of that terrible illness which awaited him? I do not know, but it is certain that he was very much changed during the first few days after the arrival of Cécile and her husband. He became gloomy and preoccupied. Captain Eblis asked me one morning if I had remarked this alteration in Roger's character. On my replying in the affirmative he made some laughing remark about the intimate footing upon which the

Prince Viviane appeared to be in our house, and gently hinting that his attentions were, perhaps, the cause of my husband's altered manner.

I of course knew that such an idea had never entered into my husband's imagination, and also that it was impossible that Captain Eblis had been commissioned to give me a hint upon the subject, so he must be speaking entirely on his own authority. This suggestion made me very angry. I am not a saint. I had forgiven M. Eblis for having married Cécile after winning my heart, but when he presumed to arrogate to himself the position of conjugal adviser it was rather too much.

"My dear sir," I replied, "since you are good enough to interest yourself in our private and domestic matters, and in the 'correctness' of my *ménage*, I will condescend to inform you that your penetration is entirely at fault. No doubt you are correct in attributing my husband's altered manner to a feeling of jealousy, but you are entirely mistaken as to the object!"

He grew very pale as I finished speaking; then bowed and left me. Two days afterwards we heard that he had been suddenly summoned to Paris. His wife did not accompany him, however.

I called upon Cécile the next day. She suddenly asked me a very curious question.

"Do you think my husband is happy?"

"My dearest," I replied, "you must know that better than I can tell you."

"I am afraid," she said, nodding her pretty little head—"I am afraid that he may not be quite happy; I am too frivolous, too fond of gaiety, too worldly; I am always dreadfully repentant—*after* I drag him about after me like a martyr—poor man. I reproach myself, but I go on all the same. It is that evil spirit

in me, you know. Has my husband ever complained? He has not said anything to you, I suppose?"

I could assure Cécile that M. Eblis had not confided in me at all; and she then recovered her usual good spirits. She remained at Nice another fortnight after this; and although I was as fond of her as ever I did not see her go without a sensation of relief. Truly, good woman as she was at heart, she was too brilliant and attractive. The representatives of all nations who congregate at Nice gathered round her as bees around their queen, and my husband used jokingly to say that he would have to put her under a mosquito-net. Satiated as she was with the attentions of all sorts and conditions of men, she nevertheless liked to be made much of, and always tolerated compliments. That is why she felt somewhat piqued by the "want of taste" of Prince Viviane, who displayed an indifference to her presence to which she was unaccustomed. She declared that I had spoiled him for all other women, and that I ought to lead him about, tame, with a rose-coloured ribbon.

But all my gaiety went with her. Soon after her departure my husband's health, which had apparently been getting better, suddenly gave way, and the most alarming symptoms set in. The remainder of his days would now be a long, painful trial for both him and me, and, indeed, towards the end of the year I lost him. After terrible suffering he breathed his last, painlessly, and thanking me for the many years of happiness I had brought him. M. d'Eblis, who had come to the death-bed of his old comrade, joined his tears with mine as we stood by the bedside.

I pass briefly over these sad recollections. God knows my grief is sincere, even if, by writing about it now, I may appear to be wanting in decorum and respect for my dear husband.

CHAPTER II.

WIDOWHOOD.

I SPENT the first period of my widowhood at Louvercy with my mother-in-law; and after that I went to stay with my grandmother in Paris, intending in the future to pass my time alternately with these dear old friends and relatives.

Great mental shocks such as I had received appear at first to suspend all animation, and one feels as if one could never be aroused to life again; but by degrees the heart begins to beat for the world again, the brain resumes its sway, and at first it appears a grief the more that life should persist in forcing itself upon us under the circumstances.

In my altered condition my little daughter naturally occupied the first place in my heart, but she did not absorb all my life. I had found many old friends in Paris, and amongst them the dearest and most faithful of all—Cécile and her husband. I met Cécile almost every day, and she related to me with all her old vivacity the little *on-dits* of the town and the gay world. She lavished the most tender affection upon me, and my love for her revived in full force. I saw her husband less often, but he never lost an opportunity to pay me any little attention in his power. In my grief and altered circumstances and melancholy business details

which asserted themselves he was like a brother. He was guardian to my little girl by M. de Louvercy's will, and he appeared to have concentrated upon her the affection which he had so devotedly entertained for her father. It is scarcely necessary to say that I had long ago pardoned the strange indiscretion of which Captain Eblis had been guilty relative to the Prince de Viviane. He never remembered it himself except to endeavour to atone for his injustice by attention to the prince when they met, and particularly in my house. For M. de Viviane lived alone in Paris, and I frequently received him, as I had had no fault to find with him since we had left Nice.

My only grief was caused, and inadvertently, by M. d'Eblis. I had no one but myself to blame for the restless sense of pleasure with which I looked forward to his visits, and the secret emotion his presence caused me. But I was in hopes that this unfortunate trace of my youthful affection for him would by degrees expire from usage; and I trusted that the calm, respectful courtesy of his manner towards me was intended rather to soothe than to keep alive my feelings for him.

Nevertheless I took a great, and, I believe, purely affectionate, interest in the relations of Cécile and her husband. Their attitude towards each other appeared to me very singular. Contrary to all my anticipations, I found now, as I had guessed at Nice, that Cécile was the master spirit. She had quite shaken off the intellectual and moral influence which I imagined a man like Captain Eblis would have exercised over her, and he to all appearance did not in any way suffer by the change. He submitted to all the worldly tastes and dissipations of his wife with an indifference or a resignation entirely inconceivable.

He had for many years accompanied her into society wherever she went, but he now permitted her to go

out alone. This surprised me very much, and I kept asking myself whether they could possibly love each other, and were they happy; I could not, of course, put such delicate questions to either husband or wife; so I continued to study closely, even anxiously, their appearance, manner, and even their conversation, in the hope of getting a clue. But Captain Eblis was at times grave, at times cheerful, but always impassible as the sphinx; while Cécile, in her never-ceasing gaiety, was equally invulnerable.

Other people as well as myself were perplexed by their conduct, and began to speculate upon it. One day Captain Eblis was calling upon me when the Prince de Viviane was announced. M. d'Eblis, as usual, soon rose and took his leave, after having exchanged a few friendly words with the prince. As soon as the captain had gone away the prince said—

"That cousin of yours is an extremely pleasant fellow, but he is a perfect enigma to me."

"In what way an enigma?" I asked.

"Because, with everything that the world can give him, he seems determined to lose his very charming wife."

"I really do not understand you, prince."

"What! do you not see that he gives her her own way more and more? He does worse than abandon her; he permits her to be chaperoned about by that Madame Godfrey!"

"And who is 'that Madame Godfrey,' pray?"

"Madame Godfrey," he replied, "was formerly very pretty and very much sought after. She is now one of those stars who, being no longer lustrous themselves, are very glad to receive reflected light from the younger and more brilliant satellites whom they cause to revolve in the same orbit with them."

"Thank you for your explanation, and if this Madame Godfrey be such a dangerous woman, rest

assured that Cécile will break off all relations with her. With reference to your other remark, I think I can explain the secret of Captain Eblis's behaviour. He has perfect confidence in his wife, and let me add that I am sure such confidence was never more worthily bestowed. I have known Cécile from infancy, and under all her playful sallies, and Madame Godfrey notwithstanding, I can affirm that she is quite incapable of any unrighteous thought."

"Oh! good gracious! of course she is incapable of wrong," exclaimed the prince; "all women are—up to a certain point! But when they choose to live fast lives fast thoughts will intrude, and then actions are apt to follow. It is very curious and sad, but none the less true!"

"Prince," I replied severely, "these are thoughts which your former worldly nature dictates; they are a reminiscence of the time when you believed there were no good women in the world."

"Well," replied the cynic, "I am not so sure as to the increase in the number yet. I beg your pardon, madame—I beg your pardon sincerely—I am of course only referring to the regular women of the world, who cannot breathe except—— Well, well, I could tell you my experience as a man of the world, but, as I displease you, I will merely add that I believe your cousin to be all that you affirm."

I paid little attention to his impertinence, but yet there was something in his manner which impressed me in spite of myself.

One circumstance which followed close upon my interview with the prince ought to have enlightened me. Cécile and her husband dined at my house. She was dressed for a ball, and Madame Godfrey was to call for her at half-past nine o'clock. My grandmother, feeling indisposed, had retired, but my little girl, who

ought to have gone to bed too, begged to be permitted to sit up a little longer, and at her guardian's request I allowed her to remain. As soon as Cécile had gone I sat down to the piano, and Captain Eblis seated himself at the farther end of the room. I was playing some melody of Chopin's, and could hear him talking in an undertone to my child, of whom he was very fond. After a moment or two, happening to lift my eyes, I caught sight of M. d'Eblis reflected in the glass opposite. His head was bowed between his hands, which rested upon the table before him. Just then the child approached me on tiptoe, and pulling me gently by the sleeve, whispered—

"Mother, he is crying!"

I felt half-giddy for the moment, and then a faintness came over me. There are some terrible moments in most women's lives, and this was one.

The door opened—the nurse had come for her little charge. I kissed her, and she then ran across the room to kiss Captain Eblis.

I continued to play, and forbore to look in the glass again. I tried to compose myself and to arrange my thoughts. The sudden tenderness displayed by Captain Eblis before me and my child after his wife's departure left no room for doubt that he was very unhappy. I could see no more than this, but I could judge from my own feelings. I could no longer conceal from myself the origin of the interest that I took in Cécile and her relations with her husband. I loved him, and loved him so much as to wish for the disruption of his marriage, which would make me happy!

I have always recognised the truth of the creed that sinful thoughts are not in themselves wrong so long as we do not permit them to govern our actions. I have acknowledged that the best and perhaps the only way to conquer our sinful inclinations is not merely to

oppose them by the abstract arguments of reason, conscience, and honour, but to act against them, to force them to turn in the right way when they show any desire to go wrong.

My resolution was taken. I would act upon it without delay.

This resolution was to have a complete and clear understanding with Captain Eblis. It was an experiment of which I fully acknowledged the risks, although I was far from surmising the gravity of the situation. But it seemed to me necessary to brave all the dangers, and in my enthusiasm I fancied I should overcome them.

I suddenly left the piano, and approaching Captain Eblis, who pretended to be reading very attentively, I said—

"I have something to say to you. Let us come out into the garden."

He appeared very much astonished, but he rose without speaking and followed me.

Fortunately the garden is quite private. It is surrounded by high walls, and contains several fine trees. The drawing-room opens down into this garden by three or four steps, and though we were then in November the night was exceptionally mild and fine.

For a few moments we paced side by side without speaking, and not a sound but the "crunching" of the gravel beneath our feet broke the stillness.

At length I plucked up courage and said—

"You know, Captain Eblis, that I am devoted to order and propriety, and dislike anything approaching to dissension. It is a passion, a mania upon which you have often quizzed me, but you will excuse me, I know—— Well, then, will you allow me to try to re-establish order in a certain household in which I am greatly interested?"

"In whose household, madame?" he asked, sternly, I thought.

"Why in yours, of course. I am quite aware of my indiscretion, I own. But if my friendship for Cécile and you is not sufficient to plead my excuse, remember that you came to ask my opinion about your marriage, that I advised you to wed Cécile, so let me release myself from the responsibility."

"But, madame, I have never reproached you," he said.

"Certainly not. It would have been most unjust if you had, for if you had taken my advice you would have been both happy; as it is, neither one nor the other is so."

"Excuse me, madame. It appears to me that Cécile is, at least. I give her full liberty, and she ought to be perfectly happy."

"Cécile does not complain," I replied quickly; "but can you suppose that she is really happy when you go your way and she goes hers? when you leave her to herself or confide her to the first comer, when you let her see more and more every day that you care nothing for her love—or, indeed, for her reputation? Do you suppose that she has no sense, nor heart, nor honour? *I* know she possesses all three."

"By heavens! madame," he exclaimed, in constrained but deep and thrilling tones, "I did not intend to complain, but you force me to do so. Have *you* ever reflected upon the destiny of a man preoccupied by serious things, fond of work and ambitious of the honour which honest work bestows, who dreams of the charms of study and the delights of domestic peace, but who is dragged day and night into society and into the whirl of dissipation by his wife? He knows very well that duty and prudence make it necessary that he should accompany her, but when he perceives that his

whole life is to be passed in this way, that the child, the silly girl to whom he is bound for life, is degrading him, is destroying his intellect, his future, his dignity, even his life—what is he to do? His courage fails, he stops short in his course discouraged, but resigned to whatever may happen."

Surprised and upset by this outburst from a man usually so self-contained, I replied very gently—

"But, in good faith, have you done all in your power to reform Cécile's worldly inclinations?"

After a pause he replied—

"I have done nothing of the kind."

"Well, then you are very much to blame. I have told you before, and I repeat it now with the same conviction of the truth of what I say, that Cécile is one of those whose faults lie on the surface, that she loves and respects you; you have entire control over her, and there are no sacrifices that she would not make for you."

"And what right have I to ask for sacrifices?" replied Captain Eblis. "My conscience forbids it. What have I to give her in exchange for the pleasures which she would relinquish? One only asks for sacrifices from a woman one loves!"

"A woman one loves! Great Heaven! are you speaking of Cécile? What! do you mean to say that when you married you did not love her?"

"Never!" he replied fiercely. Then more rapidly and in a low voice he continued—"Ah! I did not deceive her, God is my witness. I have only deceived myself—and you!"

The whole truth now flashed upon me at once. I almost screamed in my agony—

"Oh, unhappy man! what have you done?"

"What have I done?" he repeated. "You at least should understand that. I have sacrificed myself. Ah,

madame, it is not I who have sought this interview ; I would rather have avoided it, for henceforth we must not meet. Be it so. But, since we have gone so far, you must listen till the end—you shall know all. Let me finish, I implore you. I speak with all respect. Well, then, recall the incidents of that past time. When Roger conceived that fatal affection for you, when I perceived that it had become a question of my having to choose between you and him—that I could not love you without condemning him to despair, perhaps to death—I sacrificed myself. Then by strength of will, by an effort which I endeavoured to make sincere, I tried to turn my affection to that child whom you loved, who was encircled by your charms and by your tenderness.

"Yes, I believed I loved her, but it was your image reflected in her that I really loved. And if these were the last words I shall speak I swear to you that, to-day as ever, I have loved you, do love you—you alone!"

I listened as in a dream with eyes gazing into the darkness, and when I thought with painful regret of all the happiness which we had lost I could not restrain my tears. He bent down and perceived my emotion.

"You weep," he said. "It is true, then—is it possible—you loved me too! You have also suffered Oh God! do not tell me that! Do not let me think so if you do not wish me to lose my reason—my honour!"

I placed my hand very gently upon his arm.

"I trust, monsieur, that I am not a person to cause you to jeopardise either your honour or your reason. But—I did love you very dearly—I—love you—still! If you are worthy to listen to such a confession from a lady, you may listen. I cannot stifle the feelings of my heart, but I can at least—and I trust you can also—keep them within bounds. There is no necessity for our

avoiding each other like two poor weak creatures who fear the result of a meeting; we should rather guard our affection and elevate it—give it a new character. You are aware of the task which I had proposed to myself before I knew the whole truth from you. I still intend to carry it out. Aid me, then, loyally to accomplish it; assist me to win back your wife's affection for you. I will promise to help you, and I will try to win yours to her. Will you assist me? If you consent I will feel so convinced of your faith that I shall be able to place my hand unflinchingly in yours. If you refuse—then adieu for ever!"

He paused for a few seconds, then without speaking held out his hand. I rose at the same moment, and we re-entered the sitting-room together.

"You must send Cécile to me to-morrow," I said, "and I will begin my lectures very gently. I need not ask you to be kind to her, for you are most indulgent already. I think you ought to scold her a little. She will be delighted, I am sure, to be scolded by you; it is only indifference which is so trying to us."

He bowed, advanced a few steps, and as quickly returned.

"Oh, heavens! I was forgetting," he said. "You know that I must leave here to-morrow for some weeks on my inspection. It is very tiresome."

"Perhaps not," I replied; "for during your absence Cécile will necessarily be much at home, which will be a step in the right direction. You on your part will have time to reflect, and when you return you will know whether you are really capable of holding to the promise which I cannot help thinking you made somewhat lightly and suddenly."

"No," he replied in a firm tone, "not lightly. I understood you at once. My life was entirely wasted; your friendship has reclaimed it and saved me. What

you proposed to me is very splendid, very heroic, but you will carry me on your angel wings. *Au revoir*, madame; you may depend upon me."

With these words he left me.

I passed a sleepless night, but I was happy. I was satisfied with what I had done. I had overcome a great trial. If any woman should read this, and if she has at any time of her life met a man whom she wished to embrace once, even though it cost her her life, she will understand me.

Cécile came next day and told me that her husband had that morning sailed for Brittany.

"My dear," she continued, "that mass of ice, as he usually is, quite surprised me. He begged me to write to him every day. Just fancy such a thing! I think he must be sadly out of his senses. He certainly will not hear from me every day."

"Why not?"

"Have I time to write? It is perfectly absurd. I will send him telegrams—'All well—a thousand kisses'—that will be quite sufficient."

"But, Cécile," I said, "will you not remain at home a little more now your husband is away?"

"Remain at home! What do you suppose I can do at home? And, after all, what does it matter whether he is here or not?—it is all the same to me!"

"I beseech you, Cécile, do be serious for a minute and let us talk over this."

"Well, my angel?"

"Are you not tired of the life you are leading?"

"No, my darling."

"Well, I am beginning to love you less——"

In a moment her arms were round my neck.

"That is not true!" she cried.

I did all in my power to induce her to continue the conversation in a confidential strain, but, although

she did not directly refuse, she avoided all my attempts and parried all my questions by some quizzical remark. I perceived that my self-imposed task would be more difficult than I had supposed, and that Cécile was terribly in love with her life of enjoyment. But I was sure that in time I should bring back that brave, erring little heart whose virtues I knew so well.

She began to defend herself with more consciousness when Prince Viviane was announced, and she was evidently glad of the opportunity to escape for that day. She rose, made a few sarcastic remarks at him—for she never lost an opportunity to make a hit—for what she was pleased to call his indifference towards her. She then left the room. I accompanied her to the antechamber.

"My dear lecturer," she said, smiling, "I am going to take my revenge. You reproach me—or you wish to reproach me—for my way of passing my life, which is scarcely deserving of such fault-finding; but if you will consult my husband I think you will find that he would much prefer to leave me in the vortex of society than to see me seated four or five times a week by the fire with such a man as that. What do you think?"

"Do you imagine that Captain Eblis thinks I am wrong to receive the prince?"

"Well, not exactly wrong, but I think he is still a little jealous even now of the memory of his friend Roger, for he does not like that prince of yours; and the fact is he comes rather too often, and people are beginning to talk."

"Well, dear," I said, "I will convince you that I can profit by good advice, and I hope you will follow my example."

"Yes, my dearest—I adore you!" And she left the house.

I returned to the drawing-room meditating upon Cécile's malicious insinuations, but they only served to hasten the performance of the resolution I had already formed. The attentions of the prince had lately become wearisome. Sometimes his high spirits amused me; his language never transgressed the limits of propriety. He had become quite reformed since his return from Paris, and as this improvement was in a measure due to me, I rather prided myself upon it. So I could not give him a curt dismissal. I merely wished to break off our acquaintance by degrees, for he appeared inclined to give it a more intimate complexion than it possessed or was ever likely to possess.

In the course of conversation he gave me the occasion I was expecting. He asked whether I should be at home that evening.

"Yes," I replied, smiling, "but not to you."

"Why not to me?" he asked.

"Because your time is too valuable, and I could not think of occupying you so much," I answered.

"You have had enough of me, I suppose?"

"I have not had enough of you, but I do not desire to see too much of you," I replied in the same tone.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he answered gaily.

"Well, then, I like you, but you must not come here so often."

I was surprised at the serious expression that his features suddenly assumed.

"I see I must explain myself," he said. "I had hoped to postpone my explanation, but the moment has come unexpectedly. It is true that I have called very frequently, and that I have had no scruple in so doing because my sentiments towards you, in my eyes, condoned the indiscretion. I love you, madame, and my love is of no late growth. Excuse me, I am quite aware what I am saying. I am now a free man. You have

made me a better one. By your kindness and good-nature you have made me a different creature. Will you, can you, be charitable enough to complete your work? May I hope that you will one day become my wife?"

This very unexpected proposal caused me greater surprise and worry than anything else.

Wishing to spare the prince the mortification of a direct refusal, I hesitated, and while assuring him how sensible I was of the honour he had done me, and of which I could not complain, as I had unconsciously led up to it, still that my bereavement was too recent to permit me to discuss the possibility of my ever marrying again. I therefore begged him not to refer to the subject any more.

But while he consented to any delay, however long, to which I might condemn him, he nevertheless insisted upon having some more decided answer—some word of hope, if possible. I could not conscientiously give him this assurance, so I was obliged to speak even more decidedly, and I told him candidly and somewhat sharply that I had made up my mind upon the subject, that I intended to devote myself entirely to my daughter, and that I would never marry again.

The prince appeared very much annoyed, and an expression of wounded pride passed over his countenance when I made this straightforward avowal. I perceived that under all his veneer as a "man of the world" there was still the temper of a spoiled child accustomed to have all his whims acceded to. He was very pale, his features worked painfully, and he glanced at me in no very friendly fashion.

He said that I wished to drive him to despair, to make him an outcast, to plunge him into the whirl of dissipation, from which he had only emerged to please me. It was impossible that I could think seriously of

remaining a widow all my life—at my age too. Perhaps I was attached to some other person—a better man, no doubt, but I might be sorry some day if I refused his hand; and, in short, said a number of things which appeared to me in the most deplorably bad taste. He took his departure at last after an attempt to turn his angry remarks into a joke, and begging me to be friends with him notwithstanding all that had passed. I made no promises, for I could not trust him. I never had had very great confidence in him, and now even that small belief had departed.

Five or six days passed and I saw nothing of Cécile. I was astonished at this, for we usually lunched together every day either at her house or mine. But I found her at home and *tête-à-tête* with Prince Viviane, which disturbed me considerably, and caused me an indefinable pang. Hitherto the prince had not visited at Cécile's house, and she had even complained of his coldness in this respect. The sudden change perplexed me, and I was by no means easier when I perceived from some remarks they let fall that this was not the first visit of a like nature. It also appeared that she would meet him at dinner at Madame Godfrey's that evening. Was it possible that he was transferring to Cécile the attention I had refused? This was too audacious, and I determined to stop it.

I waited patiently until the prince had gone, and when I was at length alone with Cécile I knelt in front of her, and, seizing her hands, I kissed them and said—

"May I speak to you?"

"Why not, dear? but speak quickly, for I must go and dress. You know that I dine out this evening."

"Will you do me a great favour? Do not go and dress; send some excuse to this Madame Godfrey, and come, dine with me, your old, old friend."

"Ah! there you are again," said Cécile, laughing, but uneasily. "Why, what have I done? Have I done anything wrong? Do you think I would misconduct myself? No, you do not, you cannot think so. You know I was always fond of amusement, that my blood runs like quicksilver, that I love excitement; but there is no *harm* in me; I am devoted to my friends and to my husband, and I do not think any one can expect more."

"My dear girl, I do not blame you for being fond of pleasure—I blame you for caring for nothing else! When we were schoolgirls together we thought of better things—we planned a more worthy existence. You do no good in the world—nothing; you do not attempt to cultivate your taste or your mind; you do not appear conscious of your shortcomings; and depend upon it this continual seeking after pleasure and excitement is dangerous. You ought to have some firm footing, or else the ground you rest upon will by degrees give way, and you will or may be exposed to some whirlwind of passion, and be carried away. I beg of you, I implore you, to pause, and let me add that the absence of your husband may very well furnish you with an excuse, for nothing would be more natural than that you should decline under the circumstances."

She waited impatiently until I had ceased to speak, tapping her little foot impatiently upon the carpet.

"Well, perhaps there may be something in your sermon; I will think about it. But to-night, as I have formally engaged myself to go to Madame Godfrey's, I will go."

"Do not, Cécile, I beg of you!"

"Why not? Why are you so particularly anxious that I should not go to Madame Godfrey's? Come, be frank with me. Is it on account of the prince? Are you annoyed because you found him here?"

"Good heavens——" I began.

"Ah! I see you want to keep him all to yourself. It looks like it, at any rate."

"I want him so little that a day or two ago I refused his offer of his hand. If I betray the secret it is only because I wish to put you on your guard against—— But no matter, you will now know how sincere he can be. But I know your delicacy and pride, and I cannot imagine that he would ever dare to address you or to attempt to console himself in your friendship."

Cécile rose and drew herself up to her full height.

"I do not believe you," she said; "I do not believe a word of it. You are jealous—that's the reason."

"Cécile, do you say this to *me?*"

"Yes, I do say so. You are jealous; I repeat it. Why, for the past two years you have received the prince *tête-à-tête* every day almost, and because I receive him for two or three days by mere chance I am therefore doing wrong. You are jealous. Well, there, you need not get angry—I will send you your prince back again. I do not care about him, I assure you."

"You poor child, I wonder where you can have picked up such a tone as that. Do you know you are grossly insulting?"

"And do you know that you have been insulting me for the last hour? Am I to be treated always as a child without sense or as a woman without honour? Good afternoon; I must go and dress."

My eyes, half-blinded by tears of surprise and grief, sought hers in vain; she avoided my gaze. I turned towards the door.

"Charlotte," she said, "won't you give me your hand?"

"No," I replied, "you are not worthy of it."

And I left the house.

I returned home deeply distressed. It seemed as if I

had lost everything. My dearest friend had quarrelled with me, and my life was now a blank; the great link which bound me to the outward world was broken. And by this obstinacy on Cécile's part the friendship between us—her husband, herself, and me—was completely severed, for how could I continue an acquaintance with him if she declined to visit me?

But I was in hope that this ill-humour of Cécile's would not last, and that her really good heart would bring her to a better frame of mind. I quite expected that I should see her at my house next day confused and repentant.

It was fated that I was not to pass that "next day" in Paris. Very early in the morning I received a letter from Madame Hemery—the lady who was acting as "companion" to Madame de Louvercy—informing me that my stepmother was seriously ill, and that she was very anxious to see me and my little girl. On receipt of this intelligence I forgot everything else, and hastened to Louvercy as fast as possible.

My mother-in-law had a severe bronchial attack, but after a week had passed she was pronounced out of danger. I was very anxious to return to Paris, but that was out of the question. It was now December, and I had promised to take my little daughter to her grandmother's house for Christmas and the New Year, and as we were not far off I had no pretext for declining.

Just then I received a letter from Cécile which partly comforted me, but still I was very anxious. I need not give the letter in full. Let it suffice that she apologised in set terms for her unkindness; but notwithstanding the thoroughly ladylike terms of the letter, there was a strangeness about it which I could not understand.

Alas! I understood it all later!

I immediately replied, and endeavoured to clear away the sudden melancholy which had apparently fallen upon the lively Cécile. I reminded her of the duty she owed her husband, and advised her to keep as much at home as possible, and by no means to go into society or to exert herself in any way.

Her reply to my letter somewhat reassured me, for, although her note was brief, it displayed a sensibility which the previous one had not, and she now appeared to be as calm and as wordly-wise as ever. She confessed that I was right, that the continued gaiety bored her, that she had made up her mind to be more domestic, and only waited her husband's return to begin the system of "reformation" she sketched out for herself—and so on.

This language, although greatly opposed to her former letter, appeared to me to be more natural and straightforward, and as I was aware that Captain Eblis would return from Paris the following week, I was more at ease than I had been during my stay at Louvercy.

It was the evening of the 17th of December. We had just finished dinner when we thought we distinguished the sound of bells—the cracking of a whip in the avenue. This was somewhat astonishing, for we lived so very retired; and, with the exception of the curé and the doctor, we had no visitors; besides, the weather and the remoteness of our château was quite sufficient excuse for any one who did not desire to call.

There was a hard frost and the snow was deep, so we were, in a measure, cut off from the world. This was an event, and my little daughter ran to the window—all children are curious.

"There is a carriage, mamma. I can see the lamps coming nearer and nearer."

I rose and rubbed my handkerchief across the panes

to get a better view. I could see the black shape of a carriage standing out in relief against the white carpet of snow. There was no noise except the jingling of the bells, for the wheels rolled noiselessly over the snow.

My mother-in-law and I exchanged inquiring glances, but ere we could arrive at any conclusion as to our visitor the door opened and Cécile stood before us! She came towards us rapidly, and began to speak as she advanced in a rapid, nervous manner.

"I thought I should surprise you," she said. "My husband has written to say that he will not return immediately, so I thought I would come and spend a week with you, and here I am. I really had begun to think that I should have to stay all night in the snow. We have been about three hours coming from the railway station. I am positively frozen."

She shuddered as she spoke, and I was struck by the pallor of her features, but this alteration I attributed to the effects of the cold and the fatigue she had undergone.

While my aunt was scolding her gently for being so rash I persuaded her to take a seat by the fire, and gave orders that dinner should be prepared for her. But Cécile assured us volubly that she had dined at Mantes, and then commenced in a feverish and excited manner the narrative of her journey, the difficulty she had had to find a carriage, and the terror of her maid when she found herself in the wood in a snowdrift. She frequently came to a sudden stop and gazed thoughtfully at the fire, then as suddenly resumed her narrative. Towards nine o'clock Madame de Louvercy, who was still far from strong, excused herself and retired.

"You had better go to bed also," I said to Cécile; "you appear very tired and feverish. We can talk tomorrow when you are better."

"No, no!" she cried; "I am quite well. Let us go up to your room; we shall be more cosy there than in the drawing-room."

My room was the same that I had occupied six years before when I had first visited Louvercy. I preferred it to any other for associations' sake, and besides, it opened into another room which had formerly been my grandmother's, and in which my little girl was now sleeping.

So Cécile and I went upstairs, preceded by the housekeeper with a lamp. She arranged the fire and left us alone.

Scarcely had she quitted the room when Cécile, throwing her hat upon the bed, hurried across the room and shut the inner door, which had been left open. Then returning to me with a measured step, and placing her hands upon my shoulders, she looked gravely into my eyes, and said, in a tone I shall not easily forget—

"Charlotte, you must save me, or I am lost!"

My blood ran cold. What could she mean?

"The truth," she replied. "You must assist me—I cannot help myself."

For a minute or two I was silent, then I said—

"Go on; has it anything to do with the prince?"

She bowed her head in a weary affirmative.

"Yes," she said; "he has paid me a great deal of attention lately. Oh, Charlotte! I have been so miserable at heart. I was annoyed with you for telling me the truth. I did not understand him; I had no thought of wrong, nor have I sinned. But last night my eyes were opened; my folly appeared to me in its true colours. I have done very wrong—I have encouraged him to amuse myself."

She shuddered and appeared likely to faint. I supported her to an arm-chair. I knelt down before her and buried my face in my hands.

In a few seconds I felt her fingers playing with my hair.

"How good you are, Charlotte!" she said. "I was quite innocent of any wrong, I assure you, and the insult I have drawn upon myself I shall never forget—never—never. Oh, if they only knew!"

"My darling Cécile!" I said.

But she drew back.

"No, no, I do not deserve it. I have been so very wicked; I feel I have. Why, do you know that last night at the ball the prince asked me to—run away with him and leave my husband, who will return to-morrow? Oh, Charlotte! what have I done? *I consented*—I don't know why—I had no excuse."

"You have been very foolish, very thoughtless, very——"

"Oh!" she continued, sobbing convulsively, "how can I ever meet my husband again? This is why I have come to you to-day. I have run away out of his—out of *that man's* reach. But how can I ever face my husband again? He was so kind, so good to me, so straightforward, while I——"

"My dearest girl, you must see him."

"How? It is impossible! At least I cannot tell him what has passed, but still if I *do* tell him he will either pardon me or kill me. In any case I shall be free. Shall I tell him? Do advise me. What *shall* I do?"

I made no reply.

"Then I suppose he will kill me," she said, as she rose and stood upright, "or I must kill myself."

I forced her to resume her chair, and seated myself close beside her.

"Be calm, dear Cécile, I entreat you. Let me think. All is so sudden—so unexpected—you are so feverish. Let me see. You ask me whether you should tell your husband. I can hardly advise you to do so, and yet I

think that that would be the wisest course after all. Still yours is an offence which your husband can hardly pardon, and besides, he will seek satisfaction if you mention the man's name. But if your husband should find it out, you can quite imagine what will happen then. On the whole, I think it will be better to say nothing about it, as I believe if you confess your fault you will run a great risk of losing your reputation and your husband too."

"But what happiness can I expect for the future with this horrible secret gnawing at my heart?"

"You have done this wrong—you must suffer alone. It seems to me that you would only aggravate the trouble by imparting your folly to your husband. You may atone for it by bearing the trial unaided."

"Oh, I cannot! I cannot!" she exclaimed as she bowed her head upon her hands.

Her beautiful hair fell in profusion upon her shoulders, and completely concealed her features. She was the picture of despair, and I felt that it was incumbent upon me to encourage and rouse her.

"My darling," I said, "you have been under the impression that you were not loved, and you now think that you are lost to your husband. These are extreme fancies. I do not wish to extenuate your conduct, which has been inexcusable, but perhaps you may have thought you had some excuse——"

"Excuse!" she said bitterly. "Not a shadow of an excuse!"

"Now recollect, you told me how very cold your husband was—how unkindly he treated you by finding fault with your going out, and——"

"I told you a falsehood," she murmured. "You know very well that it was I who snubbed my husband, that I wished to go about without him, that I preferred my silly pleasures to his society and affection, and see

the result—how I have been awakened from my dream of enjoyment! You yourself said I should come to some unhappy end. No, I have no excuse—not one!"

"Well, but do not despair. Let us see what we can do. I think if I were in your position I would——"

"What?"

"I would make up my mind to behave in an entirely different way in future, and try to atone for my fault. I would shut myself up in my duty as in a cloister, and do all in my power to increase the happiness of my husband, whom I had so nearly sacrificed. I would undergo any trial and trouble for his sake, and would devote my life to him, just as a nun would devote herself to her duties. And, depend upon it, a day would come when I should feel that I was pardoned and consoled."

Her eyes sparkled. She embraced me warmly.

"You have saved me," she said. "Yes, I think it is possible, but I cannot grasp it all now. My poor head is quite bewildered. Do you *really* think that I can see him again?"

"Certainly you can, and you ought."

She looked at me as a frightened child might look, and continued—

"Can I kiss him again?"

I made a sign in the affirmative.

"I must go back to Paris to-morrow," she continued. "He will return at four o'clock."

"Yes, but you need not meet him the very moment he returns. I will see you to the train at nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

Thus it was settled. We agreed to pretend that a telegram had arrived from M. d'Eblis, so that Cécile's sudden departure might be accounted for. I accompanied Cécile to her room, assisted her to undress, and did not leave her till she was safe in bed, for her nerves

appeared to be quite unstrung. But at length, exhausted by excitement and her hasty journey, she seemed calmer and inclined to sleep. I left her, therefore, and with a warm and comforting embrace sought my own room; but sleep was denied me. I could not rest for thinking of Cécile. Was she in her right mind? I began to fancy all sorts of terrible things. She was certainly different in manner, and her terror and nervous excitement were so much more like brain affection than mere fatigue or remorse for a folly—not a crime—for that, evidently, was not in her mind.

Next morning, at seven o'clock, while it was still dark, I rose and went to Cécile's room. I knocked at the door. There was no reply. I entered. The candles were burning out upon the chimneypiece. I hastened to the bed.

It was empty.

I was very much alarmed. Casting a hurried and terrified glance round the room, I perceived her travelling dress and cloak, &c., were all lying upon the sofa where she had thrown them the previous evening. Her portmanteau was lying open in the corner, and much disturbed. I had remarked the night before a ball-dress in this trunk, and Cécile had accounted for its being there by saying that her maid had put it in by misadventure.

That dress was not now in the trunk.

A vague terror seized me. I rang the bell violently, and then hurried away to my room to dress.

I very soon summoned Jean, an old soldier servant of my late husband, who had remained with me in a confidential capacity.

I told him briefly my fears, and begged him to accompany me into the park. He must have seen that there was something very wrong, but he forbore to ask questions. We were soon ready, and we left

the château by the stables, so as to avoid observation.

I was, however, obliged to give the man some reason for my unusual request, and as we proceeded I told him briefly that Madame d'Eblis had arrived the night before in a very feverish state, that she was scarcely accountable for her words or actions, and I fancied she must have walked in her sleep, for I had found her room empty when I went in at seven o'clock, and so on.

I determined to go at once in the direction of the Hermitage, for I knew that it was poor Cécile's favourite retreat, and confided my purpose to Jean, while I insisted that no other person should be informed of our melancholy excursion.

Jean, after his first astonishment was over, suggested that he should go for the doctor. This had not occurred to me strangely enough, so he hastened back and told the lodge-keeper to fetch our medical attendant. We then resumed our way, and were greatly impeded by the deep snow. We took the most direct route to the Hermitage, but no traces of footsteps could be discovered. I was beginning to cherish a hope that, after all, I was mistaken, when, at a turn of the avenue, Jean uttered an exclamation and stopped suddenly. I hurried up, and to my inexpressible horror perceived the prints of small and dainty boots, which alone broke the smooth surface of the white carpet of snow.

We looked at each other sadly.

"Let us go on quickly," I whispered.

For a long time we followed the footprints in that silent grove under the cold grey sky, and amid all the mournful desolation of the winter landscape. The tracks led us nearly to the park gate, and then swerved suddenly into a footpath which intersected the brushwood, and emerged a few paces from the Hermitage.

"You are right, madame," said Jean in a low voice. "She is *there!*"

I could not proceed. I was shivering with nervous terror and apprehension. Jean begged me to accept his arm, but the pathway was not wide enough for two abreast. I passed him and went on.

Yes, she was there!

I have stated in the former portion of this narrative that this Hermitage was an open space surrounded with trees, a favourite retreat of Cécile's in consequence of its poetical and exceptionally retired character, its little fountain, and its picturesque and profound solitude. And there she lay. My glance fell upon her immediately. I turned the corner of the path, but she was not readily distinguished, for her pale ball-dress and laces mingled with the white carpet of snow as she lay extended at full length, her head resting against one of the large beeches which in summer shaded the fountain.

She was covered with a gauzy veil of newly-fallen snow, and I can distinctly recall the appearance of the flakes which now and then fell from the bare branches of the trees and rested upon her upturned face.

I rushed forward and threw myself upon her inanimate form.

"Cécile, Cécile!" I cried.

I knelt beside her; I rubbed her limbs; I held her cold hands—colder than the snow itself—in mine. Alas! all to no purpose; her heart had ceased to beat—the poor and still lovely features were turning blue. She was dead!

"Oh, my darling, darling child!" Then, and not till then, my tears burst forth.

Yet I could not realise it, notwithstanding the sad confirmation of my companion—I could not believe that she was indeed dead. I remembered that a charcoal-

burner's hut was not far distant, and thither I directed Jean to carry her, in the hope that the warmth might yet revive her. The brave fellow, tears coursing down his manly cheeks, raised the poor stiff body in his arms, and we directed our steps to the hut. What a scene—what a funeral march it was! All nature disrobed or wrapped only in its wintry shroud—and the poor human body clad in costume for a *fête!* Her weak, wandering mind may have wished to leave the most touching memory of herself in our hearts, and one most worthy of our tenderest pity, and caused her to dress in that ball costume.

While the people in the hut were endeavouring to restore animation, I directed Jean to hasten to the château for the doctor, who must have arrived. But why need I pursue the harrowing details? The doctor came, and told us all the dreadful truth.

We brought her to the château a few hours afterwards.

I told my mother-in-law the circumstances: how Cécile must have been attacked by delirium, and wandering out into the park had sunk exhausted in the snow and died of cold. The terribly weak and feverish state in which she had arrived would fully account for the truly sad termination of her young life.

Captain Eblis was immediately telegraphed for, and informed that his wife had been suddenly taken ill. He arrived the same evening. Madame de Louvercy and I received him, and he knew in a moment from our faces that all was over. He merely begged to be left alone with the remains of his wife, and what he suffered who can tell but Heaven?

A day or two later poor Cécile was laid to sleep in the little cemetery at Louvercy, close to the spot where years before in sportive jest she had laid herself down in the open grave.

CHAPTER III.

AN EXPLANATION.

CAPTAIN EBLIS remained till the end of the week. We saw very little of him, as he kept himself very much in his own apartments or took long solitary walks. He was very silent and reserved. He asked no questions, but apparently accepted without doubt the account I had given him of his wife's death.

A month afterwards—about the middle of January, when I had returned to Paris—he called upon me for the first time since my return. After some desultory remarks he approached me, and, putting one finger upon my hand, said abruptly—

"Why did poor Cécile kill herself?"

I was so completely taken by surprise that I could not reply distinctly.

"What!" I exclaimed; "but—Cécile did not—kill herself."

"You are hiding something from me," he continued. "I am sure she did."

"You know more about it than I do. It is impossible; I was there and you were not."

"Excuse me," he said; "I think you must have greatly exaggerated poor Cécile's symptoms. Julie, her maid, says she was sad, preoccupied, but quite herself.

She went into her room later and found Cécile up, sitting in her *robe-de-chambre*. She said she could not sleep, and was going to write to pass the time till she felt sleepy. She seemed to have been crying, and was very pale, but quite mistress of her words and actions, Julie thought. There was no appearance of delirium then. You have deceived me, no doubt for very excellent reasons, of that I am convinced. But she killed herself. Why? Can you tell me? You must know."

"Once more I repeat that I know no such thing," I replied as firmly as I could.

"You *will* not; it is not because you *cannot* tell the cause of her suicide," he retorted.

"If she *did* commit suicide I do not know the reason," I answered.

"My poor friend, you are not accustomed to tell falsehoods. That is sufficient; I will not press you further. I know quite enough. She killed herself the day before my return, the day before she was to see me, because she did not wish to see me. If this *were* the case she did well."

What I suffered during this speech I cannot tell.

I had no intention to abuse the last confidence reposed in me by Cécile, but as her husband had already half-guessed her secret from no fault of mine, what was I to do? I could not bring myself to betray her confidence, and yet I was desirous to spare Captain Eblis as much as possible, and to preserve the memory of his wife from even a suspicion. I preferred to wound him openly rather than to humiliate him.

"Well, then, monsieur, if you will have it so, she *did* commit suicide. You want to know the reason; I think I can tell you something, and you shall know it at once, but I still maintain that there was no suicide."

I took from my desk the last letter Cécile had written after our little quarrel, and which was addressed

from Paris. In this letter she had endeavoured to excuse her faults by blaming her husband, and complained that he did not love her. With great apparent sincerity—for it was only apparent, as she had subsequently confessed—she said how miserable she was because of his coldness, and wound up by saying that at times her mind seemed to fail, that she felt quite desperate, and some day would perform some rash and irrevocable act.

I handed this letter to Captain Eblis. His features contracted as he perused it, and I almost regretted I had given it to him. When he had finished it his hands fell listlessly to his sides, and gazing at me with a profoundly sad and troubled expression he exclaimed—

"Oh, Heaven! is it possible?"

I made no answer, but wiped the tears away from my flushed cheeks.

"If so," he continued in stifled accents—"if so, then *I* have killed her!"

He fell into a chair, and, burying his face in his hands, wept bitterly.

I was terribly distressed at this, but I had to make choice between two evils, and I chose the lesser. Had I told him what Cécile had told me I could not have cleared her memory, for jealousy is a bitter foe, and with Captain Eblis even the suspicion would have clung to the innocent but too-confident Cécile.

It was late when Captain Eblis rose and appeared calmer and more collected. He thanked me warmly and even affectionately for having "told him the truth, terrible as it was for him," and then he left me.

But although I was convinced that for dear Cécile's sake and for Captain Eblis I had done the best in my power, and though there was now no reason why he should not come and see me, yet I could not conceal from myself the fact that I had placed an obstacle in the

way of our union, if he ever thought of such a thing. His delicate and generous mind would recoil from asking any woman—and particularly me—in marriage, believing he was repairing to some extent the faults he thought he had committed against Cécile.

That is the trial which I must submit to, and it is threatening me. I have re-read this journal, and with all sincerity I can state that I cannot find anything in my behaviour to him contrary to the best feelings implanted in me by Providence. There is no reason why I should not accept the happiness so long denied me, and which may yet be in store for me.

But he? Ah! I have still hopes, notwithstanding his silence. Yes, I hope. But if I am deceiving myself, if the prevarication which I committed to save Cécile from suspicion should rise as a barrier between me and him! What shall I do then? I do not dare to contemplate the alternative.

CHAPTER IV.

GOOD-BYE!

Eight days later, 20th March, 1878.

NOTHING is wanting. Not a drop in my cup of bitterness is spared me. I must drink it to the dregs.

Captain Eblis came this evening and told me he was going abroad.

"Going abroad!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he replied. "I have obtained an appointment as military attaché to St. Petersburg. I leave to-morrow evening. I would ask permission to call to-morrow morning to say good-bye to my darling little pupil, as I fear she has gone to bed."

I told him I had just put her to sleep, but I was so thunderstruck by his sudden departure that I could not continue.

He continued in an undertone—

"We have always understood one another so well that I am sure we quite understand one another at this moment. When you told me the true cause of poor Cécile's suicide I at once perceived—and I am sure you see it in the same light—that a duty has been imposed upon me. I quite understand that you will expect that I should respect when dead the woman I did not understand while she lived. That is your wish, is it not? I will obey it, but in order that I may carry out my determination I must leave France—I must go away from *you!*"

I could not answer.

He rose. "Good-bye," he said; "I have loved you very dearly—I may say that I have loved you more dearly than my honour, for when I fancied that Cécile had not been quite straightforward towards me, and had killed herself, which fancy you removed by telling me the true cause of her suicide, I—oh! pardon me!—I entertained a secret hope that I might in time be acceptable to you!"

As he spoke he gazed upon me with a look of concentrated love, and doubt, and agony, and, wringing my hands, left the room hastily.

I had sealed my own death-warrant! I could not rest all night. I paced my room thinking of all that had passed. I fancied I saw my darling Cécile, my friend from infancy almost, begging me to preserve her memory from taint or suspicion at any cost, to leave her in her tomb as pure and spotless as she had lived in the memory of all.

Sleep in peace, my darling. God and I alone know the temptations you had unwittingly to endure, and which you at last so bravely resisted.

I had made up my mind. I wrote to Captain Eblis begging him to spare me another parting. I shall never see him again. I am alone in the world—alone for evermore!

But you, my dear little child, remain. I am writing these lines upon your cradle. Some day, my darling, you will read them, and they may cause you to pity your poor romantic mother. You may learn that such love, though romantic, may purify the heart and lead it to make great sacrifices and to part with life's greatest joy for affection's sake.

I weep, it is true, as I write these lines, but they are tears of which even the angels need not be ashamed.

THE END.

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